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Liberator

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LIBERATOR

Richard Harland



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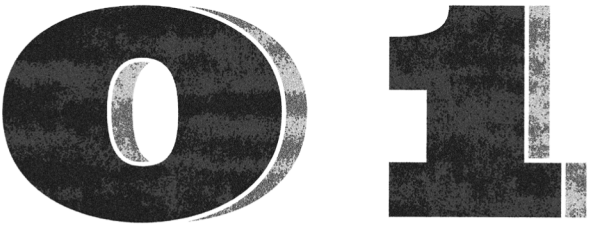
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Something bad had happened on First Deck. The news travelled the length and breadth of the iron juggernaut: from the storage decks to the old Imperial Staterooms, from the coal bunkers on Bottom Deck to the Bridge on Fifty-Fourth Deck. The saboteur had struck again, and the Revolutionary Council had called a general meeting of Filthies in the Grand Assembly Hall.

In the Norfolk Library, Col Porpentine and his family looked at one another with dismay.

"They never called a general meeting before," said Orris, Col's father.

Col nodded. "Must be worse than ordinary sabotage this time."

"I'm going to the meeting," said Gillabeth. "I'll find out." She thrust out her jaw in characteristic Porpentine fashion – unstoppable as the mighty steam-powered juggernaut itself.

Col's mother, Quinnea, fluttered in ineffectual protest. "But it's so… so dangerous, dear. Wouldn't you rather stay safe in here?"

"They need me," said Gillabeth.

Col's sister took her role as adviser to the Revolutionary Council very seriously. In the three months since the Liberation, she, more than anyone, had taught the Filthies

how to drive the juggernaut over land and sea. But she overestimated her own importance, Col thought. The Filthies were fast learners and could do almost everything for themselves by now.

"I'll go too," he muttered, and followed her out of the library.

There was a great stir of Filthies in the corridors – countless hurrying footsteps, a murmur like an ocean and grim, set faces in the yellowish light. They were all heading one way, towards the Grand Assembly Hall.

Gillabeth inserted herself into the flow and Col trailed in her wake. The Filthies ignored them and made no eye contact. A few times Col heard the scornful word 'Swanks' directed at their backs. It was the Filthies' name for those Upper Decks people who had chosen to stay on after the Liberation. Col bristled at the word, though it was hardly worse than 'Filthies' as a name for those who had once been trapped Below.

Everything had gone downhill over the past three months. Col and Riff had dreamed of a golden age of harmony and cooperation between Filthies and Upper Decks people. The change of the juggernaut's name said it all: from *Worldshaker* to *Liberator*, from tyranny to freedom. But it hadn't happened. Instead of harmony, there was distrust; instead of freedom, the Swanks lived in restricted ghettoes. And all because of this saboteur...

It had to be somebody who'd stayed on out of a desire for revenge. But who? And why should all Swanks be blamed?

The Grand Assembly Hall was on Forty-Fourth Deck, the same level as the Norfolk Library. When Col and his sister entered, it was already packed full. Gillabeth ploughed her way forward through the crowd.

The hall was a vast oval with white marble columns and

a high domed ceiling. In the days before the Liberation, it had served mostly for balls and receptions, bedecked with flowers, urns, sculptures and streamers. Col remembered his own wedding reception here, after his arranged marriage to Sephaltina Turbot. Now, though, it was a more utilitarian space that served for public and political meetings. Only the chandelier remained as a witness to past splendour: a shimmering pyramid of light and glass.

The press of Filthies grew thicker as Gillabeth and Col advanced. Halfway to the front, Col decided it was time to stop.

"Far enough," he said, and halted beside a column.

Whether Gillabeth heard him or not, she pushed on regardless. Hostile glares followed her as she elbowed her way to a position ten paces from the front, where four members of the Council stood facing the crowd. Riff, Dunga, Padder and Gansy were there, but not Shiv or Zeb. Gansy was a new member voted in to replace Fossie, who had been killed in the Liberation.

Col tuned his attention to the voices talking in low tones all around. He caught a mention of Zeb and a mention of Shiv, but he couldn't hear what was being said about them. Why weren't they present in the hall?

He recognised a face he knew in a group nearby. It was one of the young Filthies who'd fought beside him when he and Riff stopped Sir Mormus Porpentine from blowing up the juggernaut. He hoped the boy would remember.

"What's the sabotage this time?" he asked.

The boy turned, and Col saw the look of recognition in his eyes. Instead of answering, however, he glowered at Col in silent condemnation. Col's past deeds on behalf of the revolution counted for nothing, it seemed. The boy curled his lip and turned away again.

It was like a sudden drop in temperature. The mood among the Filthies was ugly in a way that Col had never seen before. Something had changed, some boundary had been crossed. What could have happened that was so bad?

He rose onto his toes and scanned the crowd. At sixteen, he was already tall – taller than most adult Swanks. Compared to the Swanks, the Filthies tended to be short and lean, a result of their previous living conditions Below. They no longer wore rags but simple tops or singlets and baggy trousers. They had never taken to the more formal fashions of the Upper Decks.

There were only two other Swanks in the hall: Col's old teacher, Mr Bartrim Gibber, and his old headmaster, Dr Blessamy. They were standing off to the side, and Col wondered why they had turned up at all. In his lessons, Mr Gibber had always taken a very low view of Filthies.

"Be patient, everyone. Shiv will be here soon. Please clear a way."

Riff was addressing the meeting on behalf of the Revolutionary Council. Just looking at her brought a lump to Col's throat. Huge dark eyes, mobile mouth, hair that was black in some places and blonde in others – she was as amazing as that very first time when she'd begged to hide in his bedroom.

Right now, though, there was a curious catch in her throat. And when he looked, weren't those patches of wet on her cheeks? Why? Tears over an act of sabotage?

He learned the reason a minute later. There was a disturbance at the back of the hall as a new group entered. The crowd opened up to let them through to the front.

It was a procession of half a dozen Filthies with Shiv at their head. They supported a makeshift stretcher of netting and poles. A heavy, lumpish shape sagged between the poles, under a bloodstained cloth.

The crowd broke out in a hubbub of cries and moans. Gripped by a dreadful foreboding, Col wished he could look away – but he couldn't. The bloodstained cloth wasn't large enough to cover the body properly, and the man's feet stuck out at one end, his head at the other.

The eyes were glassy and staring, the mouth was wide and slack, the back of the skull had been smashed to a pulp. The face belonged to Zeb of the Revolutionary Council.



"Zeb was coming down to see me about our stocks of coal. It was Darram who found the body."

Shiv spoke and the crowd listened in absolute silence. Darram was one of the bearers of the stretcher, which had now been lowered to the ground. When introduced, he stood forward to present his account. He was bare from the waist up, suggesting that he worked under Shiv's supervision in the engine room Below.

"I come up from Door 14 at the end of me shift, see," Darram began. "I was goin' to take a steam elevator on First Deck. Then I see the blood. Zeb was lyin' in the bottom of the elevator, sort of curled up. I rolled him over and his skull was all bashed in."

He snuffled and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. He appeared no more than thirteen years old.

"Go on," Shiv prompted. "You called for help."

"Right, called for help. An' I was the one that found the murder weapon. On top of a barrel of flour, it was. Just left lyin' for anyone to see."

Shiv turned to a girl who had come in with the procession. "Hold it up, Lye."

The girl held up a massive spanner as long as her forearm.

"Blood on the end," Shiv announced, pointing. "The saboteur must've hit Zeb at least twice with it."

"Why the saboteur?" asked Riff. "How do you know?"

"Oh yes, it was the saboteur." Shiv turned again to the girl. "Show them, Lye."

Col had never seen the girl before, and he would have remembered if he had. She was very striking, with a pale complexion and jet-black hair pulled back under a band. She was neither short nor tall, but held herself straight and erect in a way unusual for Filthies.

The distance was too great for Col to recognise the small metal objects she held up, but Shiv's next words to the crowd explained.

"Every steam elevator has a guide cable that runs round a wheel at the bottom. These are nuts from the bolts that hold the wheel. The saboteur must have been trying to wreck the elevator, because he'd already undone two of the four."

The crowd stirred and seethed as a ripple of comprehension travelled around the hall.

"Here's what we think," Shiv continued. "The saboteur was using his spanner on the bolts when he saw Zeb coming down in the elevator. So he used the spanner to strike Zeb instead."

Padder of the Revolutionary Council spoke through gritted teeth. "He could have walked away. He didn't have to kill."

"If he's done it once, he'll do it again," said Gansy.

Dunga nodded agreement. "He has to be stopped."

"I propose an investigation team." Shiv spoke half to the crowd and half to his fellow Council members. "We need someone to gather a full-time security force. Hunt him down till he's caught."

"I'll do it," said a loud, firm voice.

Col's jaw dropped when he saw whose hand was raised. It was his sister's.

"You?" Riff voiced the general disbelief.

"I can do it."

"You're a *Swank*," hissed Shiv.

"Exactly. Swanks want to catch this person as much as Filthies. More. Put me in charge and I'll prove it."

The crowd recovered from their surprise. There were jeers and contemptuous whistles.

Gillabeth wore her most obstinate expression. "Be fair. You can't blame us all because of one lunatic."

Shiv's pale eyes narrowed. "Unless some of you are sheltering the lunatic. Unless all of you secretly support him."

A redness crept up over Gillabeth's neck, but she wouldn't yield. "You know how much I've helped the revolution. I can organise better than anyone. Let me lead the team and I'll get results."

Col groaned inwardly. Her claims were right but her timing was terrible. Couldn't she see she didn't have a hope?

The Council members hardly needed to discuss their decision.

"I don't think any of our people would follow your leadership," said Riff.

Her mild tone had more effect than Shiv's hostility. Gillabeth fell silent.

Then the girl Lye made a suggestion. "What about Shiv?"

She seemed immediately embarrassed to have spoken, and dropped her gaze to the floor. But the crowd took up the idea with enthusiasm.

"Yeah, why not?"

"Shiv to lead the team."

"He'll uncover the saboteur."

"And the supporters."

Dunga raised a hand. "Hold it!" She was the tattooed

member of the Council, with blunt features and short-cropped hair. Her manner was equally blunt. "Shiv has a job to do. He's in charge of Below."

"Hmm." Shiv scratched his chin. "There is a way. Lye could take over my job."

Lye continued to look down at the floor. A tiny shake of her head showed modest reluctance.

Dunga frowned. "We don't know anything about her. Nothing personal," she added, in Lye's direction.

"I vouch for her," said Shiv. "She's been helping me supervise for two months now. She's very competent."

Still Dunga frowned. "Never met her before."

"Because you never come down Below." Shiv's tone sharpened. "I *vouch* for her."

Col wondered if there was more to it than competence. Shiv seemed the last person in the world to get carried away by impulse or infatuation, but still... Lye was extremely attractive. It was obvious that many male Filthies thought so too. There was a general murmur of approval.

"Are you willing to take on Shiv's job?" Riff asked Lye.

"If that's what the Council wants," Lye answered quietly.

The Council members exchanged glances, but the mass of Filthies had clearly made up their minds. Three young men near Col burst into cheers and whoops.

"So be it," said Riff. "Lye supervises Below, while Shiv gathers a team and leads the investigation."

"Not only the investigation," Shiv put in. "We'll need a security force to patrol the corridors and watch for suspicious activity. An armed security force."

"Why armed?" Riff bristled. "They don't need to be armed."

For a moment, Shiv seemed about to challenge her. Then he thought better of it. Although all Council members were

equal, Riff's pre-eminent role in the Liberation gave her special status and popularity.

"Okay, not armed," he agreed.

"Good." Riff was back in control. "Now we need to make funeral arrangements for Zeb."

"There's something else first," said Shiv.

"What?"

"We have to vote in a new Council member."

Riff shook her head angrily. "What's the rush?" She gestured towards Zeb's body on the floor. "Show some respect."

Shiv stood firm. "Not lack of respect. This saboteur is threatening us, so we have to show we won't be threatened. The Council will go on with its work no matter what he does. We have to make a statement."

It was a good point, Col had to admit. Riff had to admit it too, and her anger subsided.

"It'll need a democratic vote," said Dunga.

"We have the numbers here now," Shiv pointed out.

"If we have the nominations," said Padder.

"I nominate Lye." Shiv turned to face the crowd. "The person in charge of Below *ought* to be a member of the Council."

A dark scowl flitted across Riff's face. Col knew exactly what she was thinking. She'd had no time to prepare any other candidate for nomination. Lye would support whatever Shiv said on the Council, tilting the balance of power in his favour.

Col longed to help, but it was impossible. If he spoke up for Riff, the Filthies would react the other way. He disliked Shiv for himself, and hated him on Riff's behalf. She had been completely outmanoeuvred.

Shiv smiled, scenting victory. He turned mockingly

towards Gillabeth. “Anyone else? Would you like to be nominated, perhaps?”

Boos and hisses from all sides. Gillabeth stood impassive as a rock while the abuse washed over her.

“No other nominations.” Shiv turned to Riff. “So it’s a simple yes or no. Would you like to conduct the voting?”

Riff showed no outward signs, but Col felt her inner rage. She addressed the crowd. “All those in favour. If you choose Lye as your new Council member, raise your hand.”

A forest of hands shot up.

“All those against.”

There were no negative votes. Lye inclined her head in acknowledgement. Her face had an almost unnatural calm. Perfectly modelled nose, high cheekbones, arched eyebrows, clear-cut mouth – yet her only expression was a kind of tightly drawn seriousness.

Riff turned to her. “You are our new Council member.” She extended a hand. “Welcome.”

Lye shook Riff’s hand. “I’d give my life for our revolution,” she said.

“As Zeb gave his life.” Shiv pointed to the body on the stretcher. “Remember Zeb’s blood!”

If Lye was calm, Shiv put on all the intensity he could muster. He looked out over the crowd, swung his arms and raised his voice. “Remember who struck him down! Defend the Liberation! Fight against tyranny!”

Heads nodded in the crowd, but Riff cut him short before he could rouse them further.

“Enough,” she said. “We have our new Council member. We still have to grieve for Zeb.”

“We must never forget,” Shiv muttered, and dropped his arms.

“I’d like to inspect the scene of this murder,” said Gansy.

Dunga nodded. “Me too.”

“The Council has to make arrangements for Zeb’s funeral first,” said Riff. “Can we close the meeting?”

The Filthies shuffled their feet. No one had any more to say.

Riff took it upon herself to declare the meeting closed. However, there was no immediate move to disperse. The Filthies stood around talking among themselves, while the Council, now including Lye, discussed funeral arrangements.

Col also stayed where he was, deep in reflection. Riff had just suffered a political defeat on top of the emotional blow of Zeb’s death. She surely needed a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to lean on. Although she no longer liked to be seen talking with him in public, they could set up one of their secret meetings. Sharing her problems was the only help he could offer nowadays.

First, though, he had to talk to her long enough to set up the meeting. How? Impossible here. And impossible while the Council arranged the lying-in-state of Zeb’s body – probably in Zeb’s own cabin, surrounded by mourners.

It would have to be later, then. No doubt Riff would go with the other Council members to view the place where Zeb had been killed. If he could lie in wait for her somewhere along the way… He calculated their likeliest route. They couldn’t descend by the elevator that had now become a crime scene, so they would have to use the next elevator, then walk back along First Deck. That was his best chance to draw her aside, in the aisles and passages between the stored provisions on First Deck.

Keeping his face lowered, he threaded through the crowd and made for the exit.