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Opening extract from

Clockwise to Titan

Written by

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Chapter 1

Outside

The Moth swayed on the top of the wall, delicately positioning his feet to avoid the tangled coils of barbed wire. He wobbled as he fumbled for a handhold on the metal bars.

'Come on!' I rasped up at him through the darkness. 'They could catch us any second!' We should have had hours to spare, but things were not going to plan. We'd barely scraped through one disaster, and now we were desperately late. Moth's slowness was an agony. Was I going to have to steer him over every tree stump and hole in the ground for the entire week?

'I'm doing my best; it's not easy for me!' he whimpered. Releasing his grip on the bars that supported the wire coils, he made a sudden backwards leap, springing away from the wall and dropping more than twice his height onto the soggy ground beside me. He landed heavily in the slippery mud, but remembered to buckle his legs as he did so. He stood up, clearly winded and a little shocked at his own rashness, and leant against the wall. He raised and waggled each foot at me in turn to prove that he had managed to avoid snapping an ankle.

'That was risky, Moth,' I cautioned him, impressed all the same. Perhaps we had a slim chance. Maybe this could work;

perhaps I could take a snooty, snotty, fourteen-year-old bookworm across open country for six days and avoid capture and all the horrors that would entail. After all, we had now made it beyond the walls of the Institute, the first time anyone had done that since Topsy-Turvy had smuggled himself out in the meat skip.

We crept hurriedly along the wall in the direction of O-Wing, visible as a black slab contrasting against an overcast night sky stained orange with the glare of reflected lights. Snow was falling in soft, sticky flakes the size of coat buttons. It must have been five degrees below, but The Moth and I were already too hot in our layers of overalls and plastic wrapping. After a few minutes we reached the accommodation for female wards, where we paused for breath and scooped up handfuls of snow to pat on our crimson faces. I counted the required number of windows from the end wall, grateful that Harete lived on the ground floor. I recounted them twice more, only too aware that if I made a mistake it would be the staffroom I would be alerting to our presence. And that would spell the end of us all.

Needing no instructions, Moth hung some way back and readied himself to make a run for it. We were so far behind time by then, we didn't know if Harete would still be waiting or if she'd been discovered. The room might be empty, or it could be full of people ready to leap out and grab us. If we'd any sense, we'd leave Harete behind and just get going by ourselves, as I'd wanted to do from the very beginning.

I looked nervously over at Moth. His goggle-like spectacles shone blankly back at me, and he made a winding motion

with his hand, urging me to get on with it. I shrugged and rapped on the window with my knuckles, the noise muffled by my gloves made from socks and plastic bags secured with tape.

'This is where it goes wrong,' I muttered. 'Why did I agree to bring her? I might as well have agreed to take along a bag of anvils, or a . . .' I tried to think of the most impossibly useless and cumbersome thing one could want on a long and hazardous trip. I rapped again and we waited some more. *Hurry up, you stupid girl, our lives depend on this!* Rap and wait . . . rap and wait. There was no response. She must have given up, or been captured. How much would she tell them? We'd be faster with only two, but even so, I found myself feeling grievously sorry for the girl.

The window barged opened noisily, warped wood squeaking against wood. I tensed up, preparing to flee, but relaxed when I saw a large, bulky package being shoved part way through the opening. I grabbed the end and tugged it all out. It was a cheap foam mattress wrapped up in several layers of plastic sheeting, rolled tightly into a tube and secured with lengths of electrical flex. Moth and I each had one just the same. Next, a pair of legs appeared at the opening, enlarging rapidly in a slithering motion to form the barely recognisable shape of Harete.

I shoved the window shut. The Moth came over, and he and Harete briefly clasped each other. We secured Harete's bed roll to her body and the two friends padded after me down the slope. We slipped and stumbled our way into the narrow, wooded strip that separated the Institute from the river we had next to cross. As we entered the belt

of copse I glanced back and saw with alarm the mess of footprints we had left behind us during our progress down the squelchy, muddy slope. I swore viciously, and hoped that the snow would very soon fall deeply enough to cover them. Everything depended on it.

The three of us bumbled and crashed our way into the scrappy wood. The light from the upper-storey windows of the Institute, above us and to our rear now, was barely sufficient to penetrate more than an arm's length into the tangle of wispy branches and snaring brambles. We had to make it to the riverbank, and quickly, but there seemed to be no way through. There was no path. The twigs and briars snared and tripped us, rasping and ripping our home-made waterproofs.

I was boiling hot, dizzy from the heat inside my bizarre outfit. At least that aspect of our plan had worked well; too well, in fact. I flailed my arms in front of me and kicked out with a leg into the dark undergrowth, but met only with more snagging thorns and whipping branches. I felt the other two hovering impatiently a step behind me, anxious to get away, not understanding why I had let them down so soon. One of them, I could not see who, bent down onto all fours and tried to force a way through a small archway of branches, but almost instantly became hooked like a fish on the thorns. Knowing that to hole our waterproofs could be fatal, I unsnagged whoever it was and they retreated.

I pulled off my improvised balaclava and let the soft, fat snowflakes cool my head as I thought. Why had this gone so wrong? Moth and I must have been missing for close to

half an hour by now, and we were barely out of the perimeter wall's shadow. This was worse than I had ever imagined it could be. My mind flitted back to our cell, and the awful, twitching thing that lay there, the broken spoke in the wheel of my beautiful plan. And now, these impenetrable woods. The disgrace of failing like this, after all our preparations, was insufferable.

Moth piped up. 'Let's go back!' he whispered.

My right hand rocked up to menace his chin and I had to restrain myself from making it connect. We might be within sight of its wall, but we were outside the Institute now! By escaping, we had poked out the ogre's eye, wounded and insulted him. But by bringing The Moth along, we had robbed the beast of his irreplaceable charmed amulet, mortally endangered him. That was unforgivable. We could never return.

'He means, back that way! Fewer trees, outside your cell!' Harete hissed, staring up at me angrily. My fist sprang open like a smashed clock. I forced myself to think to when I was up in my room, looking out of the barred window down at the river beyond. Harete was right, the trees *had* looked far sparser and more open there. We needed to track back along the edge of the wood until we were directly below my old cell, risk returning to the point where Moth and I had scaled the wall. Of course, if they'd noticed us missing, it would be amongst the first places the clavigers would start their search.

We set off at a fast pace, spurred by the need to make up for wasted time. To have the least chance, we simply had to be over the river before the klaxons blared and the searchlights blazed like tinned suns.

The three of us plastic-wrapped scarecrows padded back towards the main cell blocks until we were at the point where Moth had jumped down from the wall – the marks his feet had gouged in the mud were still visible. Yes, this was more like it. The short trees were thinly spread out here, the ground clear but for a carpet of leaves now disappearing under the ever-thickening snow layer. We dived into the cover of the trees and pressed on urgently through the little wood, panting heavily, trying to avoid any more damage to our strange clothes or to the bulky packs we carried. The light was terrible, the trunks and branches nothing but barely visible silhouettes. I went first, shepherding the others around obstacles that lay in their path.

'Fallen log here, then a small drop. Mind that bush to the left. Take my hand; I'll lift you over this.'

All the while I listened out, knowing that at any second the buildings behind us could blow apart like a volcano and disgorge a roiling cloud of men, men who would kick the breath from my ribs until I was four-fifths dead and think it hardly worth mentioning in their reports. *Three escapees recovered. Special-status attendee returned unharmed. One female recovered with minor facial contusions. One male, severe head and upper-body trauma. New pair standard-issue boots required, see attached requisition form. Interrogation will commence 5 a.m., no restrictions on methods. Suggest . . .*

A slight rise, a final, unwelcome barrier of scrubby, thorny undergrowth to push through and scramble over, and there it was: the river.

We huddled on the bank, staring at it. The river was high in its bed; the surface of the black waters just a step beneath us. We could see no reflections in the river; it was just a void into which the falling snow vanished. It looked utterly deadly and very, very uninviting. I no longer felt too warm, no longer felt anything at all except an undiluted, frigid dread.

Without saying a word, I unwound our home-made rope from around my shoulders and tied it in a tight loop around my chest. I took the free end and did the same to Harete, then The Moth. A decent length of the rope dangled free behind him. We were now linked together – whatever happened to one of us would happen to us all. I motioned for them to take their rolled-up foam mattresses, sealed in layers of plastic sheeting, and to hold them tightly to their chests.

'Whatever you do, don't let go. These mattresses will keep our heads above the water. They'll float like a dream, and so will we,' I reminded them. 'When we get into the river, start kicking until we're in the middle. I want us to make it to the deepest part and be carried by that fast current. It'll be icy cold, but just bear it. When I see the pylons, I'll give you a shout. That's the signal to start kicking again to get us to the other side.'

They nodded in silence, appalled at what was to come, as was I. Would we freeze to death, or drown, or be seen and shot? But I was also relieved; relieved that we were away from the horror of that prickly wood and its grasping thorns, relieved that we were again following the plan. *My* plan.

I sat down on the riverbank and plunged my legs into the water, then pushed myself off and into it with a splash. I was surprised at how deep it was; I was instantly floating. The short length of rope holding me to Harete meant I only bobbed a short distance into the water. It did not feel too cold; our layers of insulation were working, as were our mattress-floats. Harete followed me into the water, and The Moth was almost tugged in head first as the current took hold of Harete and me and started to drag us downstream. I quickly checked to make sure that all of us were fully in and that no one had let go of their floats.

'Go!' I said.

We kicked our legs under the black water and edged clumsily out into mid-stream, where the current was strongest. The three of us suddenly spun around, no longer in a neat line but in a twirling circle. I was staggered at the force of the current and the speed with which it started to carry us away.

We clasped our large, tubular floats tightly against our chests. Each float was as big as my torso, and wonderfully buoyant. So too, to begin with, were our clothes, stuffed as they were with packaging material to keep us warm. My legs floated up behind me, just beneath the surface. As long as we kept our grip on the floats, our heads and upper bodies would be kept completely out of the lethally cold water.

We were on our way!

'To life!' I blurted out, momentarily overcome by the improbable prospect of survival and success. Immersion in the clean, fresh water felt like a new beginning, the chill

river like a liquid expressway to worlds beyond our experience.

'To j-j-justice!' came Moth's weedy voice through chattering teeth.

'To happiness!' said Harete.

We drifted and spun. Within a minute of entering the water the current had whisked us away from the Institute and the reflected orange sky-shine it had provided. Rapidly, we were in almost total darkness. We spun round and round with increasing speed, and I realised with mounting panic that I had no idea any more which riverbank was which, nor how far we had travelled. All I could see around me was a whirl of falling snow made more dizzying by our own spiralling motion.

The cold of the river, initially welcome as we stewed inside our over-insulated clothing, slowly started to grip me. I felt my legs go cool, then cold, then numb. After some minutes, I no longer knew I had legs. Far worse, water started to leak in through the dozens of gaps and rips in my clothing's outer layers where we had failed to seal them properly or where I had torn them on our way through the woods. Each new trickle of water soaked my overalls underneath and saturated the insulation, making me sink a little lower. I tried to compensate by adjusting my grip on my mattress-float, pulling myself a little higher up onto it, but it became very strenuous. Tickling needles of icy water started to make it through to the skin on my stomach and back. These were almost pleasant in the first instance, then annoying, then a torture.

For some unknowable time we drifted, twisted and bobbed. My discomfort grew, my limbs became leaden, my

head drowsy. We remained like that for . . . was it minutes? Tens of minutes? An hour? I lost all gauge of time.

From somewhere in the darkness beside me came a low, despondent groan that sounded like a life leaking out into the freezing ether. The noise shocked and scared me. The fact that we were roped together began to seem like a bad idea, for if someone let go of their float and slipped under, might they not pull the others down with them?

I shook the snow from my face and stared out into the blackness, trying desperately to find something by which to orient myself. There was no sense of motion now; it was impossible to tell if we were drifting, rotating or stationary, or, if we were moving, in which direction. Nothing could be seen of either riverbank. Even the flurries of snowflakes were becoming hard to see in the dark. I tried to focus through them and onto the shore, but found my attention sucked into the vortex of flakes, infinite in number, as they fluttered, fell, rose, danced and looped. They were restful, despite their dynamic madness. And so pretty, the swirling shapes . . . so complex and yet so bewitchingly simple. Relaxing. Hypnotic. My eyelids wilted and I found that even with my eyes closed I could still see patterns like those the flakes made. Surely no harm in closing my eyes and resting for a second. Why not grab a few seconds' sleep and let the river do its work? So peaceful . . . dreamlike . . . not even cold now . . .

Suddenly, my numb legs smashed against something hard under the water, some trapped object. The pain was incredible, my shins were on fire with the pain. I detonated awake from my cold-induced trance. I knew in an instant

that we were all just seconds from death. The freezing water was conveying us away, but convection was robbing us of our lives. Did we even have the strength left to paddle to the shore? Which shore? Where was the shore?

Something essential in me ignited. 'Swim!' I bellowed. We had to escape the freezing water; the river was a transport to oblivion. I thrashed with my legs, oddly re-energised by the pain from the blow they had received, and released my right hand from my float to use as a paddle, smashing it into the water and sweeping it back.

My brain flared and spluttered back into activity. I could not see where either bank was, but if we went across the river, not along it, we would eventually reach one or other shore. I could faintly make out the long, free length of the rope that tied us together trailing out over the surface of the water, and knew that must be being dragged out in a line by the current. So if we swam at right angles to that direction we would be heading to safety.

Over and over I dug my arm in, swept it back, dug it in, swept it back, deep and powerful, trying to drive us consistently in one direction. I sensed at least one of the other two was paddling as well, I could feel splashes of water on the left side of my head. Our three bodies collided, and for an instant I saw both their faces – wide-eyed, amethyst blue, stoked with terror. But alive!

'It's all right,' I was about to yell to them, but just as I opened my mouth, a dark shape divided us. Our three-in-one body jerked, I was violently yanked around and my back bashed into something. Harete screamed, and I knew at once we'd been caught.

I stopped kicking my legs. I couldn't see either The Moth or Harete any more; there was something huge and dark between us. I warily reached out and touched it. It was hard, metallic. I swivelled my head back and stared up through the snow.

We had become wrapped around the large, steel leg of an electricity pylon. I could make out its angular form, rising high above us. The Moth and Harete had passed one side of it, I had passed around the other, and the rope between us had looped around it. A pylon in the river? That made no sense . . . unless the river had flooded its banks and covered the surrounding land. In which case, it might not be deep here . . .

I took a gamble and raised my mattress-float up above my head. I sank up to my chest, but my feet settled onto soft mud. At that moment, a break in the cloud canopy appeared and the snowfall eased. Now I could see all four legs of the pylon that had snared us, and, very dimly, the next pylon along in the chain.

I waded over to the side of the metal leg where The Moth and Harete were bobbing in the water, outraged at how cold and tired I now felt. They kept hold of their floats and I strode through the water towards the more distant pylon, tugging them along behind me with the rope that still joined us. After a few dozen strides the level of the water fell enough for them to walk too.

'Be careful of what's beneath your feet. This is flooded land, there may be ditches or fences or anything at all below us,' I warned. We must have been walking up a slope, for with every step we took the water level fell – from chest

height to waist height; then to knee height, then to the level of our ankles.

By the time we had reached the second pylon we were free from the water, walking on squelchy mud strewn with flood debris.

We sheltered in the right-angled fold of one of the pylon's steel legs and looked back across to the shimmering floodwater, made visible by moonlight streaming through a rip in the clouds. I understood why I had not been able to see the river's banks as I had expected when we had been adrift in the current; the river here had breached its banks and swamped the land. All I had been looking out onto was the endless, flat plain of the surrounding countryside.

Moth batted me with a stiff arm, wanting to say something. His cheeks and lips were plaster white, and he slurred his words as he spoke. It was difficult to understand him. 'Which side?' he asked. He was hardly able to stand, but he'd known the crucial question to ask, as always.

I shrugged. 'We'll wait for dawn, then we'll know. If we're still on the same side as the Institute, we'll have to go back in,' I added, seeing no value in raising false hopes.

We collapsed in a shivering huddle against the pylon's leg, delirious with exhaustion and relief at being free from the icy water. I could not yet rest; I had jobs to do. First, having removed a mitten, I patiently unpicked the knots in the rope that still bound me to Harete and Harete to The Moth. Mitten and rope were carefully placed on the ground and weighted down with stones to stop them

blowing away. I was not going to let carelessness spoil our deliverance from the river.

I had just enough strength left to reach into one of the bundles strapped to my waist and pull out a small, flat tin. Inside were some pieces of broken glass. I took one in a shaking hand and used it to slice through the lengths of electrical flex that bound my float into a cylindrical shape. Freed, it uncoiled limply into its original, flat form. The foam mattress inside was covered in layers of polythene sheeting, and looked to be in good order. I motioned for The Moth and Harete to lie on the bed roll, which they did, side by side. I sat down beside them on the saturated, lumpy ground, too weary to care about its manifest discomforts, and propped myself up against the pylon.

We huddled together, all three of us soaking wet and bone-achingly cold. My brain bubbled with worries. How close behind us were they? Had our escape even been discovered yet? What had happened to . . . but I didn't want to think about *him*.

We slipped into an imitation of sleep.

This was only the start of our attempted journey to the Other country. An excursion, certainly, but an escape? Or was this all a futile charade? The doubts and vinegary injustice of it all nagged at me as I dozed, as impossible to ignore as a mouthful of broken glass.

And to think I'd once believed knowing The Moth was going to make my life easier.