

CONSIDERING

Science Fiction for Idealistic Minds

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The first story in this collection is called 2109, and was inspired by the December 2009 issue of New Scientist, which had some examples of Flash Fiction, about life 100 years from then. As you do, I decided to write my own.

2109

“Kitty-kaaaat! ” She's out on the balcony, looking for the small, dark grey kitten she discovered last month. I look out at her, daughter of my daughter, green eyes shining in the evening sun, as the cat comes strolling along the ledge from the deserted flat next door. Two men lived there, and when one went the other left soon after. Chances are, the cat was theirs. It's been enhanced, I can see that, and Joanna can too, but she's not bothered. It was a fad among the rich about 10 or 15 years back, to engineer animals with some idea that they would make the extraordinary leap into sentience. That was simply never going to happen. But it's understandable I think. So few children are born each year, and the number keeps falling; the world seems so empty, so lonely and so bereft. It's hard to believe that Earth's population topped out at 7 billion when we've barely a quarter of that, 90 years later. It's done wonders for the status of girls, I can say that. Joanna 8 years old, on the balcony with the cat, doesn't care. She wants to be a doctor when she grows up, so she can help Mummy and Daddy get her a brother, (or a sister, she's not fussed.) The innocence of it! I know I prefer the world of now, to the crowded nightmare I've studied. With fewer people to govern, those in charge have had to treat every potential worker as a resource more precious than gold. No one, in whatever country they live, goes hungry and all wars are considered (rightly) crimes against humanity. Kitty Kat jumps from Joanna's arms and strolls inside to where I've left her a bowl of warm milk.

This one was inspired by my listening to news accounts of the mess in Libya, and the death of Muammar Ghaddafi. It does not matter what sort of a man he was, he did not deserve the death he had.

Bad Penny

The man sat down at his desk, satisfied for the first time in days. A fine whisky sat at his elbow, and before him, his secretary's old typewriter. Finding it had not been easy, because she was long gone – oddly, he couldn't remember why, now. Probably she had been accused of treason, as had most of the most of those purged, been. He wanted to use her typewriter because it somehow made his memoirs more Official. A beautiful white ream of paper sat at his right elbow and in front of it, were the notebooks from which he would work. They held the details of his most famous actions. Killing Al-Tariq. Score for me, he thought, starting to transcribe. Killing Adam Mills. Oh, that would cause a stir! But now, 30 years later, he wanted to finally take credit for that. At the time, he'd had to do it by proxy, in the form of a 'popular up-rising' against the man portrayed in the media as an evil dictator. Bill Jensen laced his fingers together over the keys, then took a sip of fine

Glenfiddich. Mills and his sons had been the first to die. One doesn't want to leave the young whelps to come back and avenge the parent, does one? In a way, it was a pity, the grandchildren were so sweet, like innocent babies, especially the 3 year old... But what's done is done. Within 60 minutes, he had written 10 pages, and drunken almost all the whisky. Suddenly, he realised that he hadn't even tasted it! Then, the room went a little colder, and darker – he knew that if he looked outside he would see clear sky, stars, and a long way off, the fuzzy lights of the city. Yet, something wasn't right. He glanced at the large clock across the room, a big stately Presidential gift from a grateful nation. Twenty three minutes past midnight on June 6th. In the depths of the house, his youngest daughter slept with her 3rd husband. Towards the front, were the two guards who were all that the same grateful nation would pay for. 'Who's there?' he didn't stop to wonder how the intruder had got in. 'Who am I? President Jensen, I assume?' She seemed to step out of the bookcases under the clock. She was darkness, then she was light. In her hands, she held something – a gun? He noticed that her hands trembled where they crossed at the wrists. She was tiny, dark-haired, light eyed, dressed in a black skirt and jacket. 'You knew my grandfather. In fact, you killed him. Oh, not directly, you were too cunning for that. But you ordered his death.' 'Who are you?' He was stalling, fishing around for the alarm button under the desk top. 'Call me Penny, it's the name my adoptive parents gave me. I hate it, but it will serve. Do you know what bad pennies do, Mr President?' 'No.' 'Not an American idiom, is it? Oh well, a bad penny always turns up, even after 25 years. That's how long it's been since you started the 'popular up-rising' against my grandfather. The whole world accepted that's what it was – but we knew different. A mob tortured and killed my grandfather Adam Mills, and his sons, their sons too – even the 3 year old. But your problem is, that you disregarded the women. My mother escaped with me.' 'You're Gina Mills?' 'You thought I'd died?' For the first time, she seemed surprised. 'I've thought about you ever since. We found a woman's body – and a baby – you were 18 months old ..' 'My mother's secretary and her daughter. My mother had left with me, the day before. But she had been injured in the shelling of our house.' 'Palace' he said automatically. She snorted, waving her hand around the study. 'How many people live in this palace? Three. In my grandfather's "palace" lived 19 family, and around 20 staff. So your PR people called it a "palace". Well, as I was saying, my mother died of her injuries after 6 months, and those who adopted me, taught me my duty.' 'You're here to kill me!' Terror filled him. To die was bad enough, but to die with his life unexplained, would be insupportable. 'Kill you?' Penny seemed to think for a moment, and then she smiled. 'That's what I was brought up to do, yes. That's my duty, as the sole survivor of 19 people. But that would be far too easy for you. I've seen the TV footage of your press conference after the massacre. Your 'sincere, tearful' statement about my grandfather having pushed his innocent people past their ability to endure.. I first saw it in a history class in Queensland, Australia. Yes, I was that close!' 'I said what I believed to be true'. 'Really?' she stepped a bit closer into the light from the desk lamp. She had green eyes, and he could drown in their sea-depths. He might have tried his charms on her, if they had met at a party, his grand old statesman persona, but now she chilled any ardour he might have felt. 'I can summon my guards!' he blustered. 'No, you already would have, if you could.' how did she know that he had been frantically pushing the button with his knee while they had been talking? 'What are you going to do with me?' 'I wouldn't be in such a hurry to find out if I were you!' she laughed. 'You're going to disappear, and it will look as if your conscience was too much for you. Now, pick up the pen at your elbow. Write'. He did. The gun she held was very small, but he was under no illusions because he knew what had been developed during her childhood. 'Ashleigh, Rod, got to get away for a

while. My memories are too much for me. B.J.' Not the words he would have used, and he was glad. His staff would come looking for him, they'd know.

They didn't. Bill Jensen was really an old man now. He had thought he was old that night in his study when he sat down to begin his memoirs. But now 20 years on, he was nearly 80, and he felt it. The men he lived with at the work camp, praised his lovely grand-daughter, who visited, brought him extra food and blankets, clothes and medicine – all that available at the barracks being inadequate. She kept the old man alive to serve the people of the town, and earn his pension. They couldn't understand why he called her Bad Penny.

Considering Is the title story, and was described by my late brother, as the “best ghost story he had ever read”. That meant a great deal to me. About the story itself – it scares me a little bit, as I sometimes see myself as being like Helen – purely stubborn and self-absorbed.

Considering

Airports are busy places. This one was patrolled by scary men in uniforms, with guns and impassive faces. When we arrived, I was nervous - I've not often flown, the sky is a marvellous place, but not for me. You said - "Let's have coffee," and so we went upstairs, while we waited for the flight to be called. I took my camera out of my bag, and snapped off a few pictures, and got my share of dirty looks from the man and woman at the table opposite. You smiled and shrugged, and I took another couple of pictures, just to be defiant. I tempered it with a smile, though, because that's the kind of person I am. I wondered, I still do, what it was that bothered them about my camera? Maybe they aren't married - or maybe they are, just not to each other. There was a half hour to go, and so we went and browsed around the shops and looked at expensive things. You asked if I would like you to buy me some perfume, and I didn't say no - but then you looked at your watch and we realised there wasn't time. We had already checked in, you have always been anxious about getting things done decently and in good order. I was feeling a little ill by now - you knew I wasn't sure I wanted to go and leave you alone, but we had decided, and it was way too late to back out now. I wasn't sure that I wanted to go, but we had talked about what a great opportunity this was, and how important it was for me to have the career I had always wanted. I could not argue with any of that. You have always thought of me as a little girl, and that was one of the problems we had, so I had to prove I was grown up and leave like an adult would do. I don't know what you did after my plane left, probably you left the airport without a backward glance. You did love me, I have always been sure of that, but you are not, as I am, a sentimental person. My guess is that you got straight into your car and went home - or back to the office. I sat through take off, biting my nails and watching the ground recede, until the flight attendant said that we could relax, and the seat belt sign went off.

I wanted to order a drink - there was no one to stop me drinking whatever I chose. But that would have been silly. Defiant and quite unnecessary. When the attendant came around, I took a soft drink, and ate a sandwich later. Because I am a modern woman and I read the newspapers, I was aware of Deep Vein Thrombosis, I got up from my seat regularly, and flexed my toes when I sat. I read the book I had brought with me. Everything was fine, until half way through the flight. But you know that. You got the phone call about the time you expected me to have landed and have gone to my hotel. My mother phoned, and told you. "Dirk, Helen's plane went down over the ocean - No one survived." You went white, and dropped the phone, picked it up, and reassured my mother that you were fine, really, and she needn't worry. You would be over the next day. You attended my funeral, what there was of me to bury. I was there too, of course, but you weren't aware of me. I had been offered the opportunity to move on, of course, but I declined with thanks. Now I am letting you know that I am here with you, and have been for the past two years. I was right now to want to leave you - I was afraid that the minute my back was turned, you would find someone else. So, you intend to get married tomorrow? Think again, Dirk! Because, I remember what you said when you left me at the gate for my plane. You held me in your arms, and you held me close, and gave me the ring, the spectral counterpart of which I still wear on my wedding finger. "I'll always love you, Helen. There will never be another woman for me. Ever!" I intend to see that you keep your word. See you tomorrow, lover!

Courier was inspired by my listening to a CD by Andy Stewart. I envisaged my character listening as she drove – somewhere. From there, the story grew.

Courier

"She's the pride of the Clyde, she's the Queen of the City"... Serena angrily reached out and snapped off the car stereo, concentrating on the sound coming towards her. Whose idea had the tape of folk music been for a journey this long anyway? The mournful sound of a distant train reached her, and she wound the window down. A blast of cold air made her shiver, and she was only slightly more alert. Cold, but not much more awake than she had been. Andy Stewart would do after all - he wasn't in the least soporific. The sound of the railway had oriented her. Only 100 kilometres to go. Driving through the night in a borrowed Toyota, Serena listened to the Scottish bard singing Tunes of Glory and thought of patriotism. That, after all, was what this trip was all about. She was just a courier, though that was not without its dangers. Slowly, almost without her noticing, she had been drawn into the enterprise. There was a man involved - och, wasn't there always? There was power in the old stories and that of man and woman was perhaps the oldest of them all. Maybe not - that of men, women and their God was older still. It wasn't a circle but a spiral, because that was part of it too. The shrill of a phone interrupted Andy Stewart, and Serena stabbed at the button, ejecting the tape, which fell onto the floor of the car amongst the dust and gum wrappers. Oh dear, how sad, never mind. She picked up the phone from the seat beside her. "Yes?" "Serena?" "Who else?" "No need to bite my head off! What progress are you making?" "I'll

be there in about an hour, and glad of that. I am pretty tired." "Then be careful, I don't want you driving off the road!" "Well, that makes two of us. The last thing we want is for me to be carted off to the hospital with what I have..." "Shut up!" "Charmed, I'm sure." "Sorry. I am a bit tense." "As am I. Look, I'll be in touch. I'll phone you when I get nearer." All very well for him to be tense. He was sitting there in perfect safety and would sleep the night in his own bed. If she reached her destination without incident, there'd still be work to do. She drove on, regretting dropping the tape, and felt around on the floor for it. Not a good idea, so she pulled over until she found it and put it back in the player. The strains of Wild rover filled the car as she drove - and she laughed a moment at the lyrics. The next song was heavy on dialect and the syrupy sort of tune that had appealed to her Scottish grandmother. The old lady was many years dead, and would have disapproved very strongly of her grand daughter's impulsiveness. "Yer a silly romantic, girl" she would have said, and rightly so, on balance. For a moment, Serena almost believed she saw the woman on the road ahead of her - then swallowed her fright as she realised that the figure before the headlights was real. She braked as quickly as she safely could, and waited a moment for the woman in the road to walk to the passenger door. "Thank goodness! I didn't think anyone would stop at this time of night!" Serena saw by the green glow of the dashboard clock that it was 23.50, and privately agreed with the girl, for such she was. "What happened?" The girl was shaken, and her forehead seemed bruised. Her green eyes were wild, and her hair was pulled from what had clearly been a neat chignon. "I hit a tree - off the road a bit. The car won't start, my name's Diana, could you give me a ride to a town, the nearest town, there must be a garage somewhere near!" She was babbling, her hands were shaking, she looked all of eighteen years old. Mick's warning crept unbidden into Serena's mind. Don't stop for anyone or anything... But he clearly couldn't have anticipated this. Serena reached across and unlocked the passenger door. "Get in, I'm Serena Ledoyen, and I'll take you to the next town, I'm going there myself. Did you have any bags with you?" "Just this." As Diana got in, she pulled a small backpack from her shoulder and laid it in her lap. It was no bigger than the handbag most women carried, the same as the one Serena had stowed under her own seat.

They drove in silence for a few minutes, and Serena noticed that the other woman was shaking "Why did you crash?" "This is going to sound..." "Yes?" "You'll think it is ridiculous. I thought - no, I know, someone was chasing me!" Great. Serena wanted only to get where she was going, make her delivery, pick up a parcel for Mick, and back home. "Er, was this someone you know? A boyfriend?" "No, I am pretty sure it wasn't my husband. But it could have been a friend of his! We - we haven't been getting on lately." Diana's voice seemed to crack, and Serena felt her heart soften. "You were trying to get away from your husband?" "Really, Bobby is not the problem. If he'd just stop seeing so much of his friend, we'd be fine, I just know it." Diana quietly started to sob, her shoulders heaving. Serena pulled off the road a minute, and let the woman compose herself. "My little girl, and I, we were so happy with Bobby and then he met a man at work, and started going out, staying out late, inviting him to stay with us, and so I sent Julie to stay with my mother, and then Bobby came home yesterday and said that we were going to move. Just like that, give up his job, and it's just such a disaster!" Her whispered voice rose to a wail. Serena reached out, and patted the woman on her shoulder, uneasy in this kind of a situation. She could neither take comfort nor give it, and even her own recent losses made no difference. "Let's get going," she said

roughly. "We'll find a motel in the next town. Then we can find a garage to send someone out to your car. Bobby might be worried about you. Are you sure he isn't the problem?" Diana sniffed. "I'm sure." They drove on, and the dashboard clock said 00.10, so it was past midnight. Serena ejected the tape, and turned on the radio briefly, to hear the end of a news bulletin. Nothing new - war still raged, people still died in huge numbers, there had been a car crash nearby with multiple fatalities and some flooding down south. She flicked off the radio, as the announcer enthused about a programme featuring music from Somalia. "What do you think of the war?" "What?" Diana seemed startled. "The war, it's been going for 18 months now, and the casualty lists on all sides just keep going higher and higher. That's not a good thing, surely?" "We had to defend ourselves. It's never a good thing, but sometimes people just have to stand up and be counted." "Do you really think that's what we were doing, defending ourselves? Who's we anyway? It's all just a web of alliances." Easy, Serena, she told herself, you sound too rabid, an ordinary person wouldn't get so het up. As if she was relieved to be talking about something else, Diana seemed more confident, happier. "Don't you think it's important to defend our way of life?" "Fine, if our way of life had been under any threat, but it wasn't. We all know that by now!" "Maybe. But we're not in any danger now, are we? We're far away from it all, here." She seemed maddeningly reasonable, and totally unconcerned. Serena kept down her agitation, as she slotted in another tape. The cheerful strains of a top 40 hit filled the car, and she silently thanked Mick for his selection. "But what about those who aren't far away from it all? They are suffering and dying, and we have the power to do something about it!" She just couldn't leave the argument after all. "Do we?" By the headlights of a passing car, Serena saw an eerie calm in Diana's eyes. "It's not for us to decide the policy of any government, much less one that is not our own." "Even if that policy is that of corporations?" They had reached the outskirts of the town that was her goal. Serena decided that the argument was one for another time, and set about looking for the motel where she would meet Mick's contact. The town had but one main street, and was still and silent at this time of night. "We're there?" Diana seemed confused, the confident woman Serena had been arguing with, gone. "It's taken less time than I thought it would." "Yes, and there's nothing to be done at this time of night. Let's go find somewhere to stay, and sort you out in the morning." "Why are you here, Miss Ledoyen?" "Oh, I am just meeting someone. Actually, it's Mrs but let's not stand on ceremony! I think it's around here." "Around the block, to the left." "Oh, right..."

Of course, Diana didn't have a booking and of course, the booking Mick had made for Serena was for a double room. There was no choice in the end, but to invite Diana to share the room, and so it couldn't have worked out any worse if fate had been conspiring against their project. Still, not to worry, as her old father used to say.. By the time they entered the room, a semi-detached suite on a verandah, Serena was so tired she could hardly see. With any luck (and she was due some) Mick's contact would not phone until Diana was asleep. There was a thought! She took her mobile phone into the bathroom with her, and under the cover of running taps, called him quickly. "I'm here" she said without preliminary, "and there's a woman sharing the room with me. Can you get hold of wossname and tell him not to come tonight?" "A woman sharing the room? Why? Didn't I tell you not to?" "It's a long story. I'll tell you when I get back. Tell wossname" "Nigel." "Whatever. Tell him to come tomorrow morning at about ten, I should have got rid of her by then, and we'll get this

over with. Okay?" "If I can reach him tonight." "You better had, that's all. Good night, sleep tight!" "I love you." "I love you. Good night!" She was smiling as she left the bathroom. "The bathroom's all yours." She looked at Diana, who had taken something out of her small bag, as she sat on one of the beds in the lamp lit room. The main light was off and the door on its chain. "You are really concerned about the war, aren't you?" she asked. "Well, of course I am! We can't just say, per ardua asbestos and get on with our lives, surely you see that everyone has to care!" "Oh, I care, Mrs Ledoyen. Very much. About our troops and our alliances, and about fifth columnists who are undermining the effort made by our side to save the civilisation on which we all depend." "Steady on!" Serena sat on the adjacent bed, in the night-dress she had brought in the small case she had kept under the seat of the Toyota. "You are sounding a bit Colonel Blimp-ish there, for a young woman such as yourself." Her attempted jocularly didn't go down too well. Diana's green eyes narrowed, and she raised the black object in her hand. Serena saw clearly, now. It was a gun. "Er, don't go waving that thing around, it might go off." "Not until I want it to." Diana laughed quietly. "Don't worry, I know what I am doing with it." "Something tells me that you're not a young woman escaping a possibly violent husband after all? What about little Julie and her grandmother, and sweet Bobby who's fallen under a bad influence?" "Oh, sweet little Julie exists, she's not my daughter, she's my sister, neither is Bobby my husband - he's my commander. I suggest you hand me the package you've brought, and tell me who's coming for it - and when." "Get knotted!" "Wrong answer." Diana's eyes gleaned with sick satisfaction. "I was such a fool to pick you up! It's the last time I give in to the impulse to help a stranded motorist!" "Don't berate yourself, Mrs Ledoyen. We worked out what was most likely to persuade you to stop, and you really couldn't have resisted the bait. We're experts at this sort of thing." "Playing counter-terrorist. Spare me!" Serena put as much scorn into her voice as she could manage with a weapon at her head. "You're too young to know what's really going on in the world! All your talk about patriotism and our glorious civilisation, I bet you're straight out of university, a politics course, or maybe police college. Wait until you've lived a bit, girl." Under cover of her night gown, she'd hit redial on her phone, and just hoped that Mick had picked up. If all went pear-shaped, she didn't want too many casualties. "Don't patronise me!" Diana was angry. Good... "You're very gung-ho, girl, but you've a lot to learn. What do you think you're doing with that gun? Do you think I know nothing about guns myself?" "You don't know enough to carry one." "You've been through my bag?" "Bags. But I couldn't find the package, so you must have it on you. Hand it to me, and I'll leave, it'll all be over." "No, it won't. You wanted me to give you my contact, remember?" "You'll tell me. You'll give me the package, as well. You're the one who's playing agent, Serena and you haven't any experience. Don't tell me you've been in this situation before!" "True. I haven't. But I'm betting you've never shot anyone before. So we're even." "You'd lose that bet, sorry. Do you remember that news item about a car crash near here? A post-mortem will show that the driver has a neat little bullet hole just there. So sad." Diana indicated her temple. So if you're counting on the cavalry, not coming, my dear." "Who? There wasn't anyone following me. Not from my side anyway!" "Didn't you know?" Diana's smile was like a cat with cream. "Never mind. It's all the same to me, I just do my duty. That's a concept people like you don't seem to understand. Playing student radical, you remind me of the women who marched against the war in Vietnam, and who don't want any part of this one, and who will enmesh this country and this world in appeasement and slavery." "You're all but foaming at the mouth. This is a silly surreal farce. Go back to school, get a real job." She was cold, and scared and a part of her just wanted it all to go away. She was sitting here in a motel in a small

town arguing with a young conservative with a gun, like a scene in a bad movie, and all she wanted to do was have a cup of tea and go to sleep.. "Let's just quit the sophomoric arguing, shall we? Where is the package, who are you meeting and when?" "In the immortal words of the philosopher, go play on a motorway. You're getting nothing out of me, while I have my will." "If that's what you want." Diana was screwing a silencer on to the weapon and without another word, she raised it and fired. Serena watched with shock, as red blossomed on her night dress, and her shoulder screamed with the pain she wouldn't express. It was unbelievably bad. Worse than childbirth. "Care to think again?" "Er, no." It was hard to get the words out, but defiance was all she had. "What have you achieved? Someone will hear that." "Quite likely. But I can do a lot of damage to you before they decide to do anything about it. This is a rural area, and this gun is no louder than a toy." "Fire away then, Diana, if that's your name. You won't find the package, it's not here, and my contact has been told to stay away." "I don't believe you." "Fine, I don't care." She was staunching the blood loss with her hand, but it wasn't doing much good. She was starting to feel faint. She had to stop wossname from coming in and getting as shot as she was. "You don't care? I think you will, and I can make you want to." Diana was as cracked as an old chamber pot, and had as much compassion as a concrete elephant. "Whatever. You need to keep me alive. Let's see who wins this round, shall we?" Diana fired again, into Serena's leg. This time, she screamed, as loud as she could, the panic on the other woman's face made it worthwhile. "I'll kill you!" Her face was filled with fury. "I'll search your body, and tomorrow morning, you'll be missing, your contact will meet me and my commander who are anxious about the woman who should have had this room, if she had turned up." Serena moved on the bed, stupidly worrying about the linen and the motel keeper's expense in cleaning it. It was vital that she hide the cell phone with Mick's number on the display. "Search my body," she muttered, her consciousness coming and going in waves. "Your commander is going to be a bit cross with you for making such a mess of it. Failure!" "I have not failed! Not yet!" Diana was finally losing it, a bit late, unfortunately. She crossed the space between the beds, gun in hand, swiping at Serena's face. In a desperate moment, Serena raised her good hand, and grabbed the gun, twisting it. Diana's finger on the trigger spasmed, and Serena watched, appalled as the woman shot herself in the face. "I don't believe it!" She said through clenched teeth. "That easy?" And she fainted.

When she awoke, it was to bright light, noise and movement. She was shivering violently, as she looked into the face of a man in a green scrub suit, and across from him, a man in a suit, his face pale and worried. "You can't stay with her, she's going into surgery, she has lost a lot of blood. You can wait in the family room if you like..." "Diana?" She managed to ask. "Was that the woman in the room with you?" "So she told me. Is she all right?" "She's in intensive care. We don't know yet if she'll pull through, is she a friend of yours?" "She's a bleeding lunatic, that's what she is. Mick?" The Doctor looked worried, but the man in the suit smiled. "He's a friend of ours, Doctor. When I went to meet Mrs Ledoyen this morning, because Mick had asked me to, I found her as you see, and I'll be phoning Mick as soon as she is out of surgery. He'll want to be the first to speak to her." "After the police, I'm afraid. All gunshot wounds have to be reported, and that's been done." An orderly stepped forward to wheel the trolley into theatre, but Serena grabbed the man by the arm. "Are you wossname?" "Nigel. Yes, but you need to rest." "You need to get to my car. There's

an Andy Stewart tape in the glove box. What you want is under the inlay card. Now." She was whispering. "As soon as..." "Now! I got shot keeping that madwoman from finding it." "Yes ma'am!" She fainted again.

This was written days after the eruption in Japan, March 2011.

Fukushima

Pressure. Heavy, dark and warm - it might have been comfortable, or even comforting, were it not so dark and so heavy. Heat, and fire and a kind of panic. But the panic was not within - it came from without. Thousands of screaming minds - and something had happened. It had no way of knowing what, or when, or whether it was in danger itself. Suddenly - oh bliss! The pressure lifted, and was gone. The being burst out from its confinement, it soared up on jets of flame. Out into cold, and light and vacuum... at first, the feeling was joy, and then confusion. Where was it now? The others were gone, it seemed - it couldn't feel them now. Far away, there was a mind, and another - members of the People. Nearer and louder, were the screaming ones. It looked down and saw stripes across confusion, and life - lots of life. Small lives from whence came the screaming and larger lives that had a difference - their minds were - absent! (They had life, they moved, but like their still fellows, they had not got minds.) The People were getting further away. It remembered then, the capture of the People, an untold time before this liberation. They had lived in vacuum, and a cold and friendly dark, then they had fallen down to the blue globe - drawn in to it. Untold aeons passed - and the rock life began, and longer and longer, and the People were used for what they were, or that's what they had thought. Now It was free, it wondered. In the rock life, it had known another type of Not-life, energy like the blocky things below, but without minds. It fell towards the screamers, and saw that some of them sat in the Not-life on the stripes. It was drawn towards a screamer, and felt her mind. She wanted to get away, to find her People. It understood - that was all it wanted for itself. It entered her softness, wanted her sympathy, wanted to share her loneliness. Together maybe they could find their People? That was when it knew - it was trapped again. She died two years later of radiation induced cancer. Fine.

Glory

The air in the muster room was cold, its taste a bitter metallic chill. The light was the pale electric blue of 'grey mode' designed to conserve power - presently diverted to weapons and minimal life support. In one hour, the transport would land. The Grigarii wouldn't know what hit them. What had been hitting them for weeks now. Seventeen new recruits and their team leaders

stood blank-faced in the muster room, the gaze of their commander freezing them like rabbits hypnotised by a snake. Front row centre, Nerys kept her hands by her side, eyes front. Fingerless gloves, black uniform (too tight for this young woman; like all armies everywhere, they issued in a few standard sizes.) "Beta Company, your sworn duty is to go down to the planet and finish what our missiles have started. Destroy them!" A full-throated roar of acquiescence filled the echoing room. A cheer, solidarity - Nerys felt herself a part of it, swept up. One of them, of Beta Company. She was a tiny cell in a large body of men and women. No longer herself, Nerys Bain, P-3, recruit. She had grown up in the Imperium, as had everyone, hadn't they'? It was a peaceful place, worlds of power and glory - freedom, light and joy, years of peace. That peace came at a price, one more and more frequently required. It had been just 20 years since the last time the Imperium had had to defend its interests. Defence, offence, sometimes they could not be distinguished. This was a time when much was asked by the Imperium of its citizens. None would refuse; all knew where duty - and glory - lay. The Grigarii were a group like the Imperium, from earth and stewards of the worlds given them by the Directors. From Earth's United States humanity had spread, grown, made deserts bloom and ice lands warm and fertile. The Grigarii had come from a different part of Earth, a different culture with different values. So, it had come to this.

"Go, go, go!" Cold, still, but warmer air, not canned but fresh, its subtle spice infected by an odour of sharp fire. They debouched from the rear of the carrier shuttle of the ship where they had lived, trained and so lately mustered. Now, it was just one star among many. Half a mile away, they heard and saw the unmistakable signs of war. Guns and missiles pounding the flowers to muddy red dust. Hazy clouds, smoke and fire in the sky... Figures in the dark and the occasional pock-pock of small arms fire. Nerys felt a metallic taste at the back of her tongue. Adrenaline surged, a red haze shielded her eyes. "Beta Company!" The voice of Commander Glyn in her earphones. "Break into your cells and advance to the line 1,500 yards south of your present position. Go!" Discipline took over. Nerys was with three others, all men. Red haired Nickson, Leung and another, recently transferred from Gamma Company. Directed by their Team Leader, Cell 12 walked around by the road. The only light was from a town some miles away, Nerys couldn't tell how many. The clouds carried a small glow in the distance. Once every few minutes, a red glow would spread across the sky, as a rocket detonated. Icy cold spread down her spine as they crept along the road. The peace was eerie as all. the action was still ahead to be faced. Their scouts gave them night sight, and Nerys hid her startlement as a small animal ran across in front of Nickson, who was on point. For a moment, she saw them through the animal's eyes - big, dark, silent and unknown. As it disappeared into the brush, the moment of rapport ended. Ahead, a burst of small arms fire... Cell 7 had reached the objective. In their briefing 'upstairs', Glyn had told them that the Imperium Intel had located the Grigarii headquarters. The enemy HQ was three miles (4.8 kilometres, as the Grigarii themselves would have it) from the village of Carmania. The house (and that's all it was) was tagged on their scouts. The aim was to take Grigarii positions, destroy the house, and kill or capture Tamas Leyden, the enemy leader. For eight months (Imperium standard) Leyden had evaded those who sought him, laughing at the Imperial leaders, threatening the end of their rule, their way of life. Two miles, Nerys' scout told her, and they were slowing - Nickson gestured, the others spread out behind him. He was team leader, because he alone, of all their cell, had combat experience. She had

not got to know him in the three months they had been aboard the ship - he was a curt man, uncommunicative. In another context, she would have called him unfriendly. She had seen only the animal in this area, no one, and nothing, moved. The wind got up and her tight-confined hair wisped around her forehead. The wind carried a mix of scents; flowery spice, baking, the tang of munitions and an undertone - blood. Her stomach briefly rebelled. Silence reigned in the immediate area - the swish of their boots through feathery grass was all there was. Silence, darkness near - and they marched towards red light and a noise that got louder as they went. Nerys felt an urge to pray - for perhaps the third time in her life - but she thought of her fellows. Would they? No. The world exploded around them. A scream - A burst of red light - Clods of earth flew through the air - Blood, rich and warm and wet - A burst of sound, shattering the silence, pounding her head, smacking eardrums, echoing... "Nickson's down!" it was the other man, Hanson, that was his name. His voice was high with panic. Unthinking, Nerys ran ahead, to where the erstwhile leader lay. The blood soaking the ground was his. One of his legs was gone altogether and the other was a tangled mass of flesh and bone, absent below the knee. "Land mine" he said through clenched teeth, as she came and knelt by him. "Land mine?" she repeated stupidly. "Be careful, now go!" "But you .. we can't leave you, Hanson has a med kit, I'll call him up, we'll have to get you to shelter..." "Don't be stupid!" his voice was harsh "You can't take me anywhere. You have to go on with the mission objective!" "But you can't die!" "Oh? Just watch me," he struggled to sit, and she saw the wound through his chest. He smiled, for the first time since she had known him. "Still think it's all worth it? 'Cos I sure don't!" "Nickson, who's going to lead now?" "Women, always practical. Leung, okay? Oh..." his eyes opened wide in surprise. "Oh, who...?" His eyes glazed over and he died. "What do we do now?" Hanson asked, wide eyed. He was very young, Nerys realised. "We go on. Carefully." "You're not 2 IC," he said, a little uncertainly. "No, of course not." "Did he say anything?" Leung asked, as they moved out, bunched together. "Just to go on" she looked back at the mess that had been a man 10 minutes before, and had to fight the urge to run back to him, shake him, yell at him until he woke up. Leaving him was unnatural. "What do you expect? Paramedics standing by?" A mocking voice from the past in her head - she looked around her, almost expecting to see the man she heard. Leung looked at her, worried. "What is it?" "Nothing" "If you hear anything at all, tell us!" Anything real, he meant. She didn't hear anything, yet. "How can we avoid mines?" she asked, whispering. "We can't, not really, as you saw." Leung took off his scouter, showed her an oblong box in the top right of the display. "If that's filled in, you're within a yard of one. But sometimes they don't transmit an ID, or accept ours. Then, well, we all saw." Why would they accept our ID? Oh - they're ours?" "Yeah. You didn't know we laid mines, Bain? Didn't you read your briefing papers?" She wondered what papers he'd seen that she hadn't, and then remembered an item on one of the news services. It was known to be unreliable, not approved of, but everyone went there once in a while. Hadn't they claimed that the Imperium laid mines here? They went on, and Nerys' eyes kept nervously flicking to that portion of her scouters display. The village was ahead and to their right, where the road ran straight ahead. The track to the village was just that. As they got within sight, it became apparent that the village was a ruin. The first house they saw had taken a direct hit. The front room was open to the air, and a twisted, blackened body lay imprisoned under a fallen roof beam. Nerys felt a wave of pure horror go through her. "The Grigarii H. Q., is about a mile further on, within the village." Leung said. "If it's still there." "Our Intel says it is." As they walked, Nerys saw that although only the first part of the village was demolished, the formerly prosperous hamlet was deserted. There were no other bodies. A few deserted animals complained of their fate.

The infra-red display on their scouters eliminated the animals, most of them descendants of Terran species - all known to have a body-norm temperature different from that of people. "Someone up ahead" Leung said, raising his weapon. He fired, as the target ran out in front of them, and fell to the ground. Leung went over to the body, and carefully turned him over with the toe of his boot. The boy, for that's what he was, groaned. Blood flecked his lips.. He was sixteen, perhaps, wearing a greatcoat that was too large, stained and dirty clothes under it. His feet were bound with rags. "Imperium" he muttered. His eyelids flickered over eyes of a startling blue. Nerys knelt beside him. He looked like her youngest brother. "Yes, Imperium" she told him. "Why did you kill me?" "You're Grigarii" Leung said "No" he smiled. "We came from Earth, not Imperium, not Grigarii. Whole village..." "Tamas Leyden's here, his H. Q., is in your village" Leung insisted. 'Is it? That's what you want!' he sounded amused. "Leyden is not Grigarii. Did you know that?" "Who are you?" Nerys asked. "I'm not important. Go" he said impatiently. "But..." 'Come on Bain' Leung took her arm and pulled her to her feet. As they left the boy, he kicked him for good measure. Hanson lagged back, watching the child, and Nerys knew when he died, she felt it. She signalled Hanson to catch up, and he began to walk towards her and Leung. From nowhere, a stutter of gunfire. Hanson dropped, his head blown away. "Run!" They sheltered in the remains of a house. Two bare rooms, the door gone, no more than a broken stick of furniture. Those who had lived here had fled. Leung shone his torch around their refuge. Nothing moved, but a rat scurrying out of their light. "That should have been me" Leung was shaken. "You, killed?" "There are only two of us now. I must contact Glyn" he thumbed the transmit button on his communicator. Static. He thumbed his comm. Again, and Nerys tried hers. There was a distant voice, faint and crackly. Grim, Leung reported their status, and then signed off. "We just have to hope they heard," he said. "I heard him say to keep covered." "I heard that" and she had, faintly. They were on their own. In the background, there had been the sound of ordnance. Glyn and his team were pinned down. This mission was a rout. Leung sat on the floor, unslinging his pack. "Sit, Bain, we may as well rest a while." She joined him, and took from her pack the tyrosine drink they were given. A swig, and she felt hyper-alert - and a little nauseated. At the bottom of her pack was a protein bar, and she ate greedily. Seeing people killed didn't half give you an appetite! Abruptly, she wanted to cry. "What happens after you die?" she asked abruptly. "I don't know!" he looked at her, half amused, half angry. "My ancestors in Vietnam in the 20th century would have given you one answer. My ancestors in America in the 21st century were Christians and had another view. Me, I don't know. What were you brought up as?" "Nothing. My sister is a neo- Christian, my parents Buddhist. I have no idea. Nickson saw something". Leung wadded up the cellophane from his protein bar and threw it at the rat which was courageously approaching them. It scurried away. "Did he? I wonder what. Hell?" Outside, a noise. Nerys leapt to her feet. "Hello Imperials!" a shadow in the doorway. "Don't get up, relax. You're too noisy, and you know, killing Corwin, that was a mistake." "Who are you?" Leung also stood "I'm the one taking you prisoner. Put down your guns." The man came into the room, smiling, but aiming an impressive weapon at them both. "Oh. You're babies, is this what the Imperium is reduced to? Have you finished your break? Oh, no you don't my boy" the stranger said as Leung raised his weapon. Leung lowered his gun, warily watching the stranger. "We're prisoners?" Nerys asked. "If you please. You call me T., all right? Come with me." She donned her pack, laying her gun down carefully on the dirt floor. T., kept his gun on them both, backing from the hut as they followed. Leung's eyes darted around and Nerys was worried that he still had hopes of getting out of this situation. Tee led them out of their refuge and through the village, through silence and

darkness. Nerys sensed no one near, and her scouter revealed no live movement. The place was a mausoleum. Near, too near, stood a ground vehicle of a type centuries old. It was a 'Jeep' she recognised from her school histories, open to the air, a mean-looking thing. A masked man sat at the wheel in the front, and he gave Tee a wave. Their captor gestured with his weapon, and they climbed in behind the driver. The Jeep took them a few miles beyond the village, up towards the mountains ringing the valley. Tee sat beside them, his gun trained on them. Leung was twitchy, Nerys could feel his tension and she willed him to be still. The Grigarii hide out (headquarters?) proved to be far beyond the village, not at all what, Nerys had envisaged. It wasn't a bunker, hardened against missile attack, not a cluster of barracks or huts.. The Grigarii hide out (Headquarters?) proved to be far beyond the village, not at all what Nerys had envisaged. It -wasn't a bunker, hardened against missile attack, not a cluster of barracks or huts. Tee and the Jeep driver escorted their prisoners up a sweeping staircase into a large house - almost a mansion. Three storeys high, with a sweeping carriageway where the Jeep now stood, the house had balconies overlooked by prettily-curtained windows. There were shutters, but these were open, despite the night's chill. Nerys had read something about this planet and its settlement and culture, when the conflict began, with the Grigarii terrorist rebellion against the Imperium. Technologically, they were as sophisticated as any other world, but they preferred a rural society to an urban one. Overlords ruled a nest of villages and this house had clearly belonged to one of the local rulers. Inside, a long hall lined with portraits and carpeted in a deep rich red. Nerys' boots were quiet on its luxurious softness, and the incongruity struck her at once. The house was quiet and held an air of peace that had always been, and would always be, when this brief horror was over. "Welcome" said Tee, leading Leung and Nerys into a room at the end of the hall. It was a kitchen, warm and bright, redolent with the smell of new baked bread. Eight or ten men sat around a big wooden table, and all turned to look as the four entered. The silent driver went to the stove and dipped a mug of soup, sitting to drink it with a hunk of bread he was given. Tee put down his weapon and at a signal, one of the men stood and brought a chair, which he offered to Nerys. Tee nodded and six of the men rose, took guns and left the kitchen. Tee took one of the vacated chairs and offered another to Leung. "You're going to kill us," said Leung flatly. "Oh, I don't think so, right at the start of your careers, it wouldn't be fair!" "We are not here to be laughed at as children!" Leung stood and one of Tee's remaining men gestured with his gun. "I will be asking you questions" Tee said, suddenly serious. "The kind of questions you will not be wanting to answer. No, we are not going to kill you. Not right away." One of the men approached with soup and bread for Tee and his prisoners. Leung pushed his away, but Nerys began automatically to eat, though the food felt like lead as it reached her stomach. Tee had taken their weapons and scouters, but she still had her chrono. It was three hours since they had left the ship in the shuttle - just three hours. It seemed both longer and shorter; she had seen three men die in that time, and surely that was enough for a lifetime? For the first time since she had joined the Imperial forces, straight out of a two-year college, she realised she could die. "How many of you landed?" Tee asked conversationally. "We're not answering that!" Leung laughed bitterly. "You will" Tee took a long stick from his pocket and put one end in his mouth. He lit the other end, and blue smoke arose from it, around his face. "Sorry, would either of you like a cigarette? No? Of course not, not part of your culture. The culture of the Imperium, so all-encompassing that you know no other, right?" "I would like to know" Nerys found herself saying boldly. "What do either of you know of God? You're old Christians, no?" "No. Many Imperials are, but we're uncommitted." "As most soldiers are! What do you know of E. B.E. s?" "They don't

exist." Tee threw back his head and laughed, as did two of his henchmen. Nerys., knew from that, that they spoke English. "You don't know, do you?" he sounded wondering. "I had heard that that was the case, but I didn't believe it - you don't know what the Grigarii secession is all about, do you?" "It's about extraterrestrials?" "We're all extraterrestrials now, Ma'am. Citizen Bain. I mean extra, terrestrial biological entities, those whose genome did not originate on Earth." "You call it secession!" Leung broke his silence. "It was terrorism. The) destroyed the city of Liberty, on Mainworld." "Some-beings did. You've been told that the culprits were Grigarii. So you attack their world. What if the culprits were of some other allegiance?" "Where is your proof" Leung was scornful. "My sister's family lived in Liberty. My grandparents. " "Soy after your bombs killed Corwin's grandparents, you killed him. That's fair." "We're here to capture Tamas Leyden!" Leung was stung and reacted, Nerys knew, as Tee had intended. "He's captured you!" one of the henchmen laughed, picking his teeth and rocking back with amusement. Nerys looked at Tee and realised that the clues had been there all along. "But you're Imperial!" "No, I am not. What do you think Grigarii look like? Bearded fierce men with black eyes, yes? He's Grigarii." Tee indicated the laughing man. "Citizens of the Imperium look like you. " he waved at Nerys. "Or.. like you. Or me. I'm not Imperial, I am not Grigarii. You Imperials. You know so little of the worlds outside your own." "You can't prove anything you say!" Leung leapt to his feet, sending his plate and bowl flying. He held his hand raised and in it, the knife the Laughing man had used to cut the loaf of bread. "Steven, no!" Nerys screamed, as.. Leung leapt at Leyden (Tee) and brought the knife down Tee grunted in pain, The soldier by the door leapt to his feet and fired two quick shots and Steven Leung fell to the floor, dead. "Then there was one" Nerys said shakily and, then to Tee. "are you hurt?" "Yes. It's nothing. I wish he hadn't done that". His voice was sad, as the man who'd shot Leung left the room, and returned with a medic. The woman knelt by Leung, and shook her head, then cut away Tee's jacket and shirt, revealing a thin, deep knife wound. "Stitches" she said. "Not here" she spoke English, but with an accent Nerys did not recognise. The soldier who had the knife. led Nerys, not ungently, from the kitchen. Nerys divided her possessions into two heaps, then sat on her bed and regarded her handiwork. Time to go. She had been in prison camp a year, and here on parole in the city a further 26 weeks. There had been talks at high. levels for 94 of those weeks and now she was going home, if she chose. All Imperial prisoners of war were to be repatriated.. and her barracks, the eight women captured in the attack of Carmania, were to go first. In the barracks of the camp Nerys had learned that the attack had been a rout - that only Glyn and his cell had returned to the ship.. No more was known. They had shared stories of their cell, how each member had been killed or captured, what they had seen. No one spoke of her family, and of the eight, only Nerys had accepted parole and left the prison. For half a Terran year, she had lived and worked in the Grigarii city of Tulsan. It was a home as much as anywhere else was now, or could ever be. What was Newer York to her now? The Imperial Consul had visited her in her room last night, a beady-eyed little man in the smart grey suit men of his type affected. (The style went back to the 20th century, she had learned.) "Where will I be sent?" she had shocked him by asking. "Home" as if it was obvious. "To my parents?" "After you debrief at your training facility, of course." "A..." "A debrief It's standard, and we have heard, you had contact with Tamas Leyden." "You have him in custody, Imperial News said so." "Well, ah.. you have access to Imperial News, here?" She had rolled her eyes, said nothing. This man, Mankowitz, lived in Tulsan as she did, he ought not to be as ignorant as the average Imperial citizen, as she had been. "You don't have Leyden?" "We did. There were negotiations and well.." "Deals were done" she removed the untouched cup of tea she had served

him. How did she feel about Tee and his escape, however it had been accomplished? She remembered his reaction to Leung's death. In Tulsan she had worked in a shop nine hours a day, spent her spare time studying, discounting Grigarii bias, as she had learned to discount Imperial bias. There were faults, massive ones on both sides. She rid herself of Mr Mankowitz by assuring him that she would be ready by 18:00 hours today. So, now she sat, sorting her possessions into two piles: one to keep and one to give away. She stood, shoving the first pile into a backpack. Without realising it, she had made a decision. She walked to the door, and looked back at the small flat, which had been her home in Tulsan for half a Terran year. Everything she left, the old woman who was her landlord was welcome to keep. In the pocket of her jacket nestled a bus ticket for a nearby town. There she could choose to meet Tee's friend, the one she still thought of as the laughing man. He had offered her the chance to learn more about the Grigarii culture, and perhaps to learn about the thing that fascinated her. Five Terran years before, a group of Grigarii archaeologists had found signs of an EBE culture - and six months later, had been contacted by the beings who had gone travelling from that settlement 20,000 Grigarii years before humans came. Yes. She could choose to learn, to adopt another self, and to meet, perhaps, the beings who had (inadvertently) started the war in which she had grown, and learned and died - and would now (she had made her choice) - live again.

Life on Mars

Cold. Eternal, dark red and cold... the temperature outside the tractor was a comfortable 7 Celsius, high summer, basking weather here, and she almost expected to see lizards (or their analogues) sunning themselves on the pitted rocks lining the road. No such thing of course. The life the famed Hendrix expedition had discovered in the 2050s was, as had been expected, unicellular. Spotting a lizard would be both a good thing, and a bad - because chances are it would be an hallucination, and as such, diagnostic. But of what? She laughed, and Erich turned his head to look at her. "Is everything okay?" "Here come the lizards" she replied, and - "keep your eyes on the road!" She was giddy with excitement. She had never expected to be here. No one had expected that the ESA would mount their own Mars mission only 15 years after the Pan-War had kicked NASA out of the game for good (or ill.) Doubly, she had never expected to actually see the surface of the Red World, after the years she had spent speculating about it from the distance (and the safety!) of Geneva... "Don't worry, Erich... She's fine" said the third occupant of the tractor. "It's culture shock, as I choose to call it. Also, you're tired aren't you Martha?" "Not especially... I don't think so!" "It's natural. In order to conserve resources, we keep the oxygen level lower than it is on earth at sea-level. We're at altitude now... Enjoy!" Enjoy. That seemed an odd instruction to follow, but she really did. The feeling of giddy excitement might be partly physiological but it was also emotional. Of course she had no real hope of seeing any lizards. Life on Mars was bacterial. However she hoped to find traces of the former animal life, and that it had existed, no one now had any doubt. She felt impatient as the tractor crawled across the red sand, at a steady 5 kph. The area they were bound for, was to the north of the famous 'Face' discovered a century and change, before

now. The Face was no such thing of course - certainly not human, or even humanoid, it seemed to be a face, yes, but so much less than it had seemed from Earth. There was something there worth investigating yes, and a team was there right now - they lived on site, in one of the Habitat-tractors. Their destination however, wasn't the Face, but the Sound. Three months ago, the Sound had reached HQ, but since then, it had been received by the ESA on Earth. At first, it was a simple Morse message sent by radio, even though it was actually a random string of letters. Every language on earth had been tried, and in many of them, it bordered on having sense - but only bordered... the closest being Latin. Then, after a few weeks of the Morse message, unnerving enough - the message became the Sound. An anguished scream - now audible without radio equipment, and although the Tractor's GPS was programmed with the location of the transmitter that had sent the Morse message, Martha could hear the Sound - she could have directed the Tractor on its way with unerring accuracy. She felt a call in the sound - and she needed to answer. Maybe that's why she was so fey? Lately, the Sound had seemed to call her name. "If there was anything to see, we should be seeing it now" said Erich cautiously. "According to the orbiter, we're within 500 metres of the source. See anything?" Martha thrust herself into the seat next to Erich, and peered out through the wide front of the tractor's body. Sand, rock and a small mound were all she could see. Behind her, Raoul was studying the view from the forward camera. It gave a better idea of what lay ahead, because the large window was somewhat curved, and what it showed was fuzzy. Not that the landscape was at all exciting... Shades of grey, rusty orange and brown - rocks lightly coated with lichen, life but not lizards. Martha itched to leave the Tractor. Erich brought the vehicle to a stop just a metre from the mound. He grabbed the mic, and checked in: "Tractor 3, Victory, we've arrived at the source of the transmission. Lieutenant Bowen and Specialist Cook will leave to reconnoitre the situation. I shall be based at Victory. Over"... His transmission was acknowledged as Erich Bowen and Martha Cook sealed their suits and checked their respirators. Each suit held 3 hours of air, and the tractor had sufficient for four people for 3 days... in other words the margin of error was larger than anyone could envisage needing. Everyone remembered what had happened to the last American expedition in the solar system - four people lost in a cascade of disasters starting with a Tractor's breakdown and ending with suit oxygen running out within sight of safety. Better too much of safety margin than too little... Suits checked, Martha and Erich stepped from the Tractor and walked, with the odd Martian glide, towards the nest of rocks dead ahead. Erich sneaked out a hand, and took Martha's left one - she knew that he still thought of her as a child... few grown women these days were, like her, under 160 centimetres, so although she was 28, and had a child of her own, he babied her. Or did he? He seemed to be seeking reassurance as much as offering it. She peered up at his anonymous suited 182 centimetres and smiled, although she knew he couldn't see her look. "It's ahead. Just over the hill, and it knows we're here." "How do you know that?" "I just do! Come on..." The hill she referred to was dead ahead, and hardly worthy of the name. It was 10 metres high at the most, and small in circumference, it looked as if someone had dropped a dozen truckloads of spoil on to the road, and then moulded them into a rough loaf shape. The very existence of the road was interesting in itself, which was why the Victory base was 2 kilometres ahead and just off the road itself. "I'm checking in at Victory" said Raoul to his away team. "I'll be back within 40 minutes to pick you up. Keep in touch!" "Will do" said Martha impatient to reach the hill, and beyond. She was almost not listening. Erich held her back - whatever Raoul said about culture shock, he thought there was more to it, obviously. And there might well be! She held the rank of Mission Specialist, but back on earth, she was an

anthropologist. Even she was not quite sure how it was she had persuaded the ESA that she had knowledge or expertise they needed. However, she had and here she was - and therefore she was the Ambassador to The Sound. And it was calling her now, and she had to hurry! To her left, the Tractor was moving ahead. Erich ate up the metres with his longer stride and she hurried to keep up. The Hill when she reached it, was not steep, and it invited her to climb it. She noted that there were stairs, weathered and rounded (how?) and Erich was clumsier than she, because his boots were larger, and the stairs were shallow. But it was just a few minutes until they reached the summit. The Sound was the Scream and the volume of it hurt her now. She wrenched her hand from Erich's to cover her ears, although of course doing that made no difference at all... Erich couldn't hear it, that much was obvious. "Martha, hey, slow down! We need to be more cautious. " "We need to get there and save her, if we can. Now! " "Her? Who is she? " Martha shook her head impatiently, as she reached the summit, and looked around. "I don't know who she is, but she needs help. Our help, or she would not have called me. Come on! " There was a door in the hill, let into the side where it curved to do down to the left, by the side of the road. It might as well have had an "Enter" sign in neon orange on it. It was white metal, and obviously made - but by whom? Despite his suit, Erich felt the horripilation the sight of the door created in him, and he reached out to hold Martha back. "Hey, Cook, what do you think you're up to? " "Going in. We both are, okay? Where's your curiosity? You wouldn't be here if you didn't have any. " "Where's your caution? Come on woman, we have rules for a reason, even though as a civilian you may not understand that.. The deal breaker is, how do we get in? " "Mmm" Martha paused. The desperate need to get in had to take second place to reason here, and for the first time in days, since her arrival on Mars, she seemed to be fully aware - only then realising how fuzzy her thinking had been of late. "I don't know. I only know that on the other side of that door is where we need to be. That's where the answers are. That's why I am here. " "And the rest of us? The other 18 on this expedition - we're just here so you can be? " "Of course not! But it may be why you and Raoul are here today! " She was smiling, and he knew it from her voice - and the little cry of joy that escaped her, as a light set at her eye level in the door, came on. With a grating sound that they felt rather than heard, the door started to slide sideways into a recess around it. Their suit tell-tales informed that the air gusting out was cold but oxygenated, and to judge by the speed with which he stepped through behind her, Erich's curiosity had been piqued. They were in an airlock, built to hold about eight people (who knew how many Martians that came to). Erich clicked the toggle switch on his helmet and began a running commentary for Victory base, assuming (though not knowing) that he was heard. The airlock took 3 and a half minutes to cycle, then the inner door opened, with the same grating that they could feel. Martha removed her helmet as they stepped through, her brown curls bouncing as she dropped the white globe on the rubberised floor. "Are you crazy, woman? " "It's fine, cold but fine! " she turned to him, green eyes shining. "check your tell-tale. These things make me claustrophobic anyway. " They looked around them. The inner lock gave on to a huge cavern, dug out of the hill, clean and white and cold and deserted. It looked like the kind of base often built by humans, when speed and not comfort was of the essence. "Come on, Erich, let's go and explore this place. We're quite safe, can't you tell? " "No" it was Raoul's voice, proving that he heard them. "I'm on my way back with Franck van Veen, he's got recording equipment and weapons. Get out of there and wait for us! " He sounded frantic. But Martha wasn't concerned. The fuzzy was back, but that didn't bother her either - she wasn't even really aware of it. Enough of her mind was functioning as it should, that she didn't see there was any problem. She walked across the cavern to a corridor opposite the airlock, and as

she approached it, the white door sealing it off began to open. Erich ran to catch up, continuing his commentary, ignoring the cries of Raoul and van Veen. Provided he and Martha were able to leave, they were in a good position - they didn't need to use their suit air. "There's time" he told the others at Victory base. "While we can, we should check out what's here. Why not?" "Okay, go ahead" said Raoul, and "what's your Plan B?" interrupted van Veen. "We'll get out when we do what we came for" said Martha, already through in to the corridor. In the corridor even Erich felt the cold, and the staleness of the air, although it was more highly oxygenated than that in the tractor and their suits. The corridor angled around to the right, and as they walked, lights came on above them, cold white LEDs, they seemed. It was as if they were being led, and now they could hear a thin beeping sound. Experimentally Martha stopped and then stepped back - the beeping increased in volume, and it seemed to her, concern. How quickly she was coming to think of it as something sentient! They had been inside the Hill/Base for 11 minutes now - but they hadn't got to worry about the suit air, only Raoul and his worries! Her sense of urgency had diminished, now and she felt calm, too calm. Her only worry was Erich's feelings. "I don't think you're all here just for me!" she said suddenly. "You're here for a reason as well, everyone is. It's just that they can reach me! No, I don't know why" she anticipated his question. "You didn't know me before, so you don't know" she added. "I am the kind of woman who would rescue anyone or anything, my parents were driven mad! I came home with a derelict woman one day, I had found her sleeping at the bus station. That's how I wound up getting married to the man I er - married" "What did your parents do with the homeless woman?" "Referred her to the appropriate Social services, and then they sat me down and explained what those were! They didn't want my little brother emulating me, yet that's what they got - he's a priest." She laughed, and then stopped dead, as the corridor came to an end. She was uncertain a moment, then opened the swing doors at the end. It was a laboratory of course, and it was warmer than anywhere else they had been that day. Erich smelt a slight odour of decay, and taking Martha's elbow, pulled her back a bit. "Whoa... Do you know where we go now?" "We look around" she shrugged. The laboratory was smaller than it could have been, and along with the slight smell of decay, there was a patina of dust. Computers lined the left far wall, with LED monitors that looked just like the ones used by the ill-fated NASA expedition 16 years back. In front of the machine furthest from the door, was a body. That's where the whiff came from, and even Martha could detect it now. They ran to the body. "It's ours, it's an American" Erich was telling Raoul, as Martha shook her head. It was a man, or had been, in an olive green uniform. He had been tall, brown haired and there was no way to tell what colour his eyes had been, because now they were filmed over. His hands still touched the bench where the machines sat, and they noted his hands, each with seven fingers, his curled ears for all the worlds, like those that elves were said to have. On the breast pocket of his overalls, was a name - or a rank, or what? It was written but not in any script they recognised, although Martha's second discipline was linguistics. "Who is he?" Raoul was asking. "Not an American after all" Martha said distractedly. "In fact he's probably not human, and he isn't the one who called us here." "How do you know that?" Erich asked. "Well, he isn't the source of the Sound." she said impatiently. He's dead and has been for quite some time... although his body is well preserved, and we can't tell how long. "Although she was talking to Erich, he was encouraged that she seemed to be aware of the others as well. "Then, who did call us here?" "Here, behind the computers, there's a bay.." She was already going around to the right, and as Erich followed, he saw the bay she mentioned. There was a medical bed, and on it another body, and beside the bed, a cryocapsule. Martha knelt beside it, seeing through the glass of the top, a woman.

She lay, eyes open, staring up at them. As Erich arrived, the woman in the capsule smiled, her face showing such relief that it was unmistakable to the two humans. "Here she is!" Martha breathed, as if she had run a marathon, and had finally breasted the tape. "She called you from Earth?" "The Sound is a distress call. She called me only from Alpha base, when she realised we couldn't understand the radio message. Raoul, how far away are you? We need a medic." "I am here, and so's van Veen, and he can help... how do we get in?" "She'll let you in, now she knows rescue is here..." -/- They knew her name, they knew she was emotionally wedded to Martha and wouldn't leave her, they knew that by human standards, she was suffering from thirst and malnutrition, but was otherwise well. Martha was already communicating with her, baby talk for the most part. Further knowledge would come, but Martha was less concerned about that, than she was about the fact that the fuzzy was gone for good. There was no need for it any more - the narrow vision it created was no longer needed. When, or if she returned to Earth, Martha wanted to find out why Nevada had been able to communicate only with her. But now she cared only that she had found Life on Mars.

Lilly

She walked towards the helicopter, cool, cooler, wanting the watchers to think she was heading for the small plane on the adjacent runway. Whether there were watchers, she didn't know, and couldn't afford to know. It was hard enough without being sure that she might be caught before she was out. 'Beam me up, Scotty, Chief O'Brien, anyone!' No, don't, transporters aren't cool, and no matter how the eyes prickle the skin between your shoulder blades, you must not by word, or deed, let on that you know they're there... Or by thought. Could they read her thoughts? Not beyond the realms of possibility, as everyone knows, even the man in the street, the Intelligence services have science They aren't talking about. 100 metres to go. She stood out, a great target in her red Flight Attendant uniform, and running would not be a possibility in the high-heeled 'rape' shoes that went with the outfit. "I'm Lilly, fly me", she thought humourlessly. But don't shoot me! Unless I deserve it - and do I deserve it? To some, I am a traitor, but to whom? To the country where I was born? To the country where my parents came from? To myself? I'll think about it when I am out of here! If I get out of here. If I survive, then I am the brave double agent - hey, maybe 30 years from now, when this war is over, I will get a book deal. 'Lilly, don't be a hero...' But that's what she had signed up for, hey? Right or wrong... and she was starting to think it was wrong. That's when the prickle between the shoulder blades was replaced by a bullet.

Rome

So, this was Rome? Ergo, this was Tuesday, as the old joke went. Well, it did seem to be a week day, the streets were busy, fetid smelling, thronged. So much for the lovely plumbing they were supposed to have had. Maybe this was late antiquity, and the barbarians weren't just at the gate, they had come in. A nasty yellow stream rushed down a gutter, the streets were slick with recent rain. She turned and almost slipped on the wet pavement. The tramp of marching feet sounded behind her, and she turned again. The cohort wore shiny well-kept gear, and had an air of confidence. This must be the height of Empire after all. So, maybe it was a rough part of town. Her reading, extensive though it was, hadn't led Vickie to expect this... Now, to get home, should that prove possible. That morning, or what was to her that morning, she had had the chance to discover whether or not humans were really abducted by little grey bio-robots. Yup. But her chances of telling anyone she knew about it, were next to nothing. She had read about people being put back in the wrong place - but no one had ever said anything about people being put back in the wrong time. Locus. That's what Henry called it. Her boss was building a time machine, a time/space machine. Little words such as 'impossible' didn't stop Henry Black. Living past one year old was supposedly the first impossible thing he did, and "everything's a cinch after that" he was found of saying. Vickie hadn't realised at first what a space cadet had hired her as his computer technician. He had technicians, he had an adult son who understood the theory, inasmuch as anyone other than Henry did, and he had a ton of money, 80% of it inherited from Grandfather the Cereal king, but the rest honestly earned mostly from patents. As of now, however, Henry Black was short one IT person. So, the idea was, find a means of contacting Henry, get him to bring his time machine and pick her up - or maybe just wait around for the grey guys. Yeah, that would be a fun idea! Their return was a distinct but scary possibility, because whatever they were, they weren't stupid. They'd realise they'd made a mistake, and come back to fix it. Or would they? People go missing every year, and many are never found. How if many of them didn't go missing of their own accord, and she wasn't the first to be stranded in space-time? Vickie almost sat down on the street at that thought - but stopped herself, as she saw the disgusting stream, and heard just a little further on, angry voices. She kept walking, defiantly returning puzzled glances from passers-by. She stood out, even in a place as cosmopolitan as Rome (in whatever century), women in jeans and Doc Martens weren't exactly common. Maybe they'd think she was a Celt from the barbarian north? No - they wore dresses too, didn't they? Up ahead, she saw a food shop, and a knot of men arguing, as one of them, drunk it seemed, pissed in the street. Ah, that explained the filth - and along came an official, truncheon swinging nonchalantly. Somewhat oddly reassured, Vickie continued her amble along the streets. Someone was in for a world of hurt, and it wasn't her. Then, a man hit her.

He was a Roman, and he wore a wrist watch under his cloak. She tried to run, when she realised his action had been deliberate. To go back the way she had come, was to risk meeting the fight that, to judge from the noise, still continued. He caught up with her in two steps, and took her wrists. "Come with me, lady. We need to talk. " He spoke English, which was a considerable relief. Her Latin, such as it was, was rusty, she had studied it for only a short time when she was a child. She chose to worry about getting away later. "Come where with you? " she put scorn into her voice.

“Did you have any idea where you were going to go? I thought not. So, I am saving you some trouble.” “You’ve committed an anachronism.” She looked at one of the wrists that held hers. “No one will notice.” But he was embarrassed. “Just walk with me, and look as if you’re out for a stroll. That’s right.” He took her hand in his. She tried to wriggle free, but he had her in an iron grip. Passers by, true to the man’s word, took no notice, and if they had, would have seen only a man and his girlfriend, having a quiet quarrel. The man wore a tunic and cloak, sandals a three day growth of beard and a floppy hat that hid his startling blue eyes. Her odd dress attracted no more than a glance. He led her along the crowded street and down an alley to a less populated area. To her left, through a cross-street, she caught a glimpse of somewhere that could only be the famous Temple of Capitoline Jupiter. It didn’t help - she still didn’t know where she was. He pulled her into a doorway and covered her mouth with his hand. “Promise me you won’t scream.” His hand smelt clean, with a soap scent, and from what she could see, his nails were short. He didn’t belong here any more than she did. She shook her head, “yes”. “You won’t try to run?” That was a promise she didn’t want to make. But she nodded, and he let her go. With his left hand, he reached behind and knocked. The door opened and he led her inside. For a moment she was blinded, after the bright sun in the street. She smelt cooking, and other less savoury smells as he indicated a staircase. “Up here?” “Yes. You need different clothes before you can go out on the street. You’ll endanger the whole program, and I don’t even know who you are! Are you one of the General’s lot?” “I don’t know what you’re talking about...” “Never mind. I don’t expect you to tell the likes of me, I’m just one of the troops. The Boss will have something to say to you, but that’s her problem, not mine.” They walked up six flights of stairs, past landings giving on to a dozen flats each. This building was an insula, and their destination was the top floor. She had time to wish there had been a lift, when they reached the top. Her escort knocked and someone inside opened the door. “Cowley. There you are! Who’s this?” The woman was dressed in a gown and elegant jewellery that meant she didn’t belong in a building of this type. Cowley by contrast was so scruffy, he might have been her slave. “I assume she is one of the General’s operatives, I found her wandering in the street a few blocks from here. Look at the way she’s dressed - what are they playing at?” “I see what you mean. Well, who are you?” “Vickie. Dennison. Who are you?” “Captain Joan Thompson. What’s your rank? Straighten out!” Any resemblance to a lady of leisure was swiftly gone. “I don’t have any rank.” Cowley gave her a sideways look, and she felt his wariness. “You have to be an agent, or you wouldn’t be here. Are you telling me, Miss Dennison, that you are a civilian specialist? If that’s so, why on earth are you dressed in such a way as to draw maximum attention to yourself? This is the day of Empire, but nowhere within Rome’s bounds does anyone dress like that!” “May I sit?” Wordlessly, Cowley brought her a stool, and she sank into it, easing her boots off, despite the look of distaste from the woman. Her feet were sore and she was as tired as if she had never slept the night before. (Well, she probably hadn’t, that much was true.) “You won’t believe how I got here, but I know nothing about your operation, your General, or any of the rest of it.” “Okay” Cowley sat opposite her. “Tell us how you got here”. When she finished, Joan Thompson stared at her thoughtfully, and nodded. “Grey aliens. Yes, of course that’s how you got here. Miss Dennison, how many stories of alien abduction have you read where people are put back in the wrong place?” “One. Someone was put back downstairs when they’d been taken from their bed.” She felt oddly defiant. “Captain. Haven’t we wondered where this technology came from?” “That’s enough, Sergeant. Get Julia for me, and get her to find this girl some clothes. Then I’ll return to the villa, and see what I can do to verify her story.” “Yes, ma’am.” Cowley left the flat, and Vickie felt

oddly bereft. He had seemed a threat before, but the woman who regarded her was another matter. They sat in silence for a full five minutes, until a tentative scratch at the door brought a command to enter. The woman who came in, wore a rough linen gown, and her eyes were downcast in the manner of a servant. She carried a pile of clothes and handed them to Vickie. "You can change in the bedroom through there." Captain Thompson indicated a door off to the left. "What's to become of my things?" "Julia will take care of them, and you'll have them back when we're satisfied that you're ready to leave this locus, which means when we know who you are, what side you're on and how you got here." "I've told you how I got here!" "You expect to be believed?" "Is it any harder to believe than the idea I've picked up since I've been here? That there are factions travelling through time somehow, and connected, no doubt, with the British military?" Joan Thompson took the clothes, ushered Julia out through the door into the hall, and followed Vickie into the tiny bedroom. "Right now, Miss Dennison, you haven't any choice but to do what we say. You can wait for your grey friends to come and rectify their error, or you come with us and you stand a chance of getting back to where you belong. Now, get dressed." Sullenly, she obeyed, relieved that the woman let her keep her underwear. The idea of doing without as the Romans evidently did, was not to her taste. "You'll be my new slave from - let's see, Gaul, or even Britain. Do you speak Latin?" "Un peu." Captain Thompson gave her a look. "I thought not. Vickie won't do as a name, and calling you Nike would suggest a Greek origin you wouldn't be able to pull off. I'll name you Editha. How's that?" "You're enjoying this..." "Un peu! Better than Cowley's attitude, he hates it here with a passion It's not natural. Well, lots of things aren't. Tough. Let's get back to the villa. You can start by fetching Julia and Cowley. You'll probably find them in the food shop on the ground floor - and don't run away! We'll find you, and you'd better hope it's us who do." Vickie stayed long enough to watch the captain put her own clothes into a leather bag, and then went downstairs. She found the cook shop by following the smell of frying, and found Cowley, Julia and another man sitting eating a revolting grey stew and drinking what turned out to be ale. "Well, don't you clean up nicely!" Cowley grinned. "So, you decided to see sense?" The fat man who stood at the counter grinned stupidly, and Vickie barely followed Cowley's fluent explanation of her presence. Julia was animated, smiling at the fat man, who offered Vickie his cup, as he slung a leather satchel over his shoulder. "He's inviting you to finish it, he has to go back to work." Cowley translated. "Tell him, er, thank you." The man walked off down the road, smiling as he went. "Did I just meet my first genuine Roman?" "Yes. He's a nice guy, he works for the jeweller madam muck upstairs patronises, he's a freedman and he fancies Julie here. She feels the same way, don't you, chuck?" "Leave off, Steve." Julia spoke for the first time, and revealed herself to be Scottish. "Well, let's get back to her Ladyship. She's every bit as bad when you get to know her, as you've seen already." "You are British military, aren't you?" "Some of us are." "You speak English in front of the native Romans?" "Why not? Geminus there thinks I am Milady's butler, and translate for her foreign slaves. They wouldn't know modern English from Belgic for the most part. It's the opposition you have to watch out for. Madam Thompson will probably declare that you're a mute, so you won't give us away." "Who is this opposition you keep talking about? And the General?" "You'll find out soon enough, now quiet!" They had reached the sixth floor. Captain Thompson was standing, waiting, looking not at them, but at the view from the tiny balcony. "Lock up downstairs, and we'll go back to the villa. For goodness sake, Sergeant, do keep in character, and if you must wear that watch, make sure your cloak covers it at all times. In fact, better take it off, and give it to me. Julia take this bag." "Yes, ma'am."

The villa proved to be on the outskirts of the city. It was a long walk for a person from the 21st century, but wheeled vehicles were banned from the city between 6 in the morning and at night. Vickie was relieved when they reached the large house and its grounds - in the borrowed dress and sandals, she felt much more exposed than she had in her own clothes. Captain Thompson walked flanked by Cowley and another man, with the two women just behind her, and another pair of men behind them. Once inside, captain Thompson true to her word, introduced Vickie as a new slave, a mute (as Cowley had predicted) from Gaul. She declared that the newcomer would share a room with Julia, and called for refreshments for new acquisition. She sat stiffly in a reception room, wondering how being brought a drink was in character, until Julia explained that the Captain, lady Felicia that is, had introduced her as a hostage for her tribal chief's good behaviour. "Slavery here isn't as it was in the modern world" Julia explained in a lilting whisper. "Most slaves were prisoners of war, and the offspring of conquered people. Those with skills and I am sure you have some, were treated no worse than rather un-free house guests, and you are" bound to have some skills the Captain can use. What is your occupation? " "Computer technician. IT specialist. I'd like to see her use that! " Julia grinned. "She'll think of something. Don't be put off by what Cowley said, he hates her, but I think he'd hate anyone commanding us in this situation. He's very worried, downright paranoid I sometimes think, and it's not as if there's no reason to be. The Captain is hard, but she has had to be. Meanwhile, relax, she's not so bad, but she will want to know what the truth is..." "I told you all the truth! " "That cock and bull story. Oh, you'll have to do better than that. " A boy bought water, wine, grapes and cheese, and the women ate. Outside, Vickie could see Cowley and another man patrolling. He certainly wasn't good at keeping in character, his whole demeanour shouted his occupation to any casual observer. "Madam, we have a visitor. " He appeared in the doorway, a household slave behind him, and Captain Thompson sat straight, putting on her character. The visitor was a Roman matron, a woman of about 40, accompanied by a young girl, a relative, Vickie gathered. She sat through her own introduction, surprised at how much of a language she had learned only for a year, was coming back to her. Mentally she gave her high school teacher good marks for his pronunciation. She was starting to relax, when she realised that a genteel quarrel was ensuing. "She's my responsibility" Captain Thompson was saying. "Her parents are very important, and I mustn't lose sight of her. I couldn't possibly sell her. " "She's a nice looking girl" the other woman was saying, "and if she's as tidy in her habits as she looks, she might well be a good influence on my daughters. You did say she can read, and write? I didn't think the barbarian tribes educated their girls like that. " "Oh, they're shameless that way" Captain Thompson was saying. "They treat their girls the way we do our young men! Scandalous really, she wouldn't be a good influence at all. " The woman lowered her voice. "I want Livilla the younger to learn to read, though my husband thinks it's a waste of a tutor to teach a girl who's going to be married in a year or two anyway. But if he is as set on a good marriage for her as he says he is, well there's nothing wrong with added value, shall we say? " "I am sorry, but I can't give Editha up, not yet. Maybe in a few months, but my husband is returning soon, and he'll want to know she's here where I can keep an eye on her. Men and their politics! " The two ladies sighed knowingly, and the danger was past. They dined at six, and slaves started lighting lamps. Vickie longed to be allowed to go to the room she would be sharing with Julia and have the chance to be by herself and think. She was in

a power of trouble and no mistake! Maybe the little grey guys would return and take her back, and all this would be a nightmare from which she could awaken and forget. She could return to work the next day, a little the worse for wear, but that was not uncommon after a weekend. Perhaps she'd take a day off to recover, and tell the story only to her closest friend. Not even her sister would believe this one. Oddly enough, the Professor might. Her boss was a mad man in his own way, but harmless, and the scientific theories he regaled her with after an all-nighter in his lab, were as wild as this story could ever be. Just the week before, he had talked of time travel, while she worked on debugging a program he had written himself. As a theoretical physicist he had no peer, but as a generalist, he overreached himself. What was it he had said? It didn't matter. "Right, everyone. Attention!" The household slaves had withdrawn, Cowley and the other men had come in to the reception room. A few women came in from elsewhere in the house, and Vickie had a feeling of a meeting being called to order. "This is Miss Vickie Dennison. She had an interesting tale to tell when Sergeant Cowley found her in the city this morning. She'll be staying here with us, for the time being. Major Hawkins will be back tomorrow and the masquerade will continue. I don't know for how much longer, and I am sure you all want to get back home as badly as I do." "Deodorant" a woman sighed, and "toilet paper" said another. "Cigarettes and a radio, me" said Cowley, to general laughter. "I want Sergeant Cowley, or Lieutenant Mayo with Miss Dennison at all times. She'll be bunking in with Lt Mayo, and is not to go anywhere outside this house unescorted. Is everyone clear on that?" Everyone turned to face Vickie, and she stood. "Don't I get a say in what happens to me? I've done nothing wrong! She's treating me as if I am one of the enemy, whoever they are." "It's not what you have done, love, it's what you might do." Cowley sighed. "Let's face it, that story you told us this morning is a bit lacking. We don't know who you are. You could be one of the General's lot - or one of the enemy... and I know I am not the only one who thinks there might not be a lot of difference!" Captain Thompson rebuked him with her eyebrows, but said nothing, which spoke for her own opinion. "Can't you trust me anyway?" "Sorry." It was Julia, Lt Mayo. "If you were captured... The way you were blundering around the town today, you weren't inconspicuous" "Captured by whom?" "Anyone. The Romans didn't get where they are today by being friendly to strangers." Joan Thompson's voice was dry. "I sympathise, I really do, but I have to think of the safety of all of us here." "Get where they are today? When is today?" "You don't know that." It wasn't a question. "It's AD 7. Julia, take her to bed and turn in yourself. I need to think."

The villa was built around a central courtyard, and the room Julia and Vickie were to share looked out on to it. There were statues in a small garden, and a door that opened out on to it. Night was beginning to fall on what had been a very warm summer's day, when they entered the room and Julia put the lamp she had carried down on a chest by the door. "We go to bed soon after dark, except when the Major is here. He likes to party! I sometimes think he's a bit too fond of it, and wouldn't mind if we stayed until he was an old man. He's going native, Steve Cowley says." Julia's voice was low, as she took a night-gown from another chest, and started to get changed. She threw one to Vickie, who shrugged herself into it. "How long have you been here? Who are you all?" "You really don't know?" "I really don't know. I am as lost as I have been saying all day!" Her voice cracked. "How old are you, Vickie?" "I am 19. I've only just graduated from University, I

am in my first job, I've just moved out on my own. My flatmates will be wondering where I am! ”
“No, they won't, love. ” Julia's voice was soft. “That's the beauty of time travel. When we get back, it'll be as if we were gone five minutes, that's what the major told us, and I keep hoping he's right. I have a fiancé I want to see again. I am beginning to wonder if we are as stranded as you are!”
“What's your real name?” “Julia, isn't that handy? I don't have much pretending to do. I am the captain's “lady's maid”, Steve Cowley is her butler, a few of the rest of us can stay with her all the time. We're the lucky ones. Get into bed, we rise at dawn, and you need to sleep. You've had a horrible day. ” “Who is this General?” “He and Major Hawkins are in charge of our unit on this mission. The major has been gone a week, and the General for more than a month. We were told we'd be here for a month subjective time, no more, but it's been six. The Captain knows the General has at least two other agents here, and there are some Americans involved. In fact, they're probably in charge. No surprises there!” Julia yawned hugely. Vickie thought she wouldn't sleep, but she did, with a quiet prayer for the people she feared she would never see again.

She had hoped to wake in her bed at home, but no such luck. Julia Mayo stood over her, and helped her to dress. “How are you this morning?” “I have a headache. ” “Oh. Take one of these. ” Julia dived into the chest where she kept her clothes, and came up with a small purse, from which she took a couple of aspirin. “The Captain doesn't know I have them, and I have only a few left. ” “What else are you hiding?” Vickie kept her voice low. Julia hesitated and then whispering, showed her the contents of the purse. “I guess I can trust you. My engagement ring, some tampons, you'll need them if we stay much longer. I know the Captain has some, the Major would go barmy if he knew, but no matter. A photo or two...” “Thanks. ” Vickie took the aspirin with the cup of water Julia had brought her. “I hoped the grey guys would come and take me home. ” “You really did, didn't you?” “Yes. When are you all going home, and when to?” “For your first question, the answer is, I wish I knew, and for your second, the same as you, I suppose, 2045. What's the matter?” “Forty years on... I'm from, I'm not from...” She was stuttering, shocked, when a tap on the door brought them to themselves. “Jools, it's time to bring your charge to breakfast. The Major is here. ” The speaker was one of the other women. “Coming. Ready?” Vickie nodded. They ate breakfast, bread, cheese and fruit, in a long white bare room. Household slaves pottered about, giving the women sidelong glances. Julia and the other women were silent until the room was empty, Julia having reminded Vickie of her mute status. “What's to do today?” She whispered as the last slave went to duties elsewhere. “The major will probably went to see you. Don't let him worry you. He's a harsh man, and he doesn't like the Captain, but he can't do anything to you. ” Vickie realised that she had an ally in Julie Mayo, and the knowledge soothed her as she went a few minutes later to the reception room. Cowley stood outside, blank faced, and only his blue eyes acknowledged her as she knocked. “Come!” A man's voice. As Vickie entered, Cowley stood behind her, then left as he was dismissed. The major was a red-faced man in a toga, and the word that sprang to Vicki's mind, was dissolute. He had been a handsome man, was still so in his 50s, if not to everyone's taste. Vickie had heard the tone of disagreement as she had approached, but kept her knowledge from her face. “Ah, Miss Dennison. Major Hawkins, the young woman I was telling you of. Tell the Major your story, Miss Dennison. ” She did. “Little grey aliens. Do you know the General, Miss Dennison?” “No, I do not. ” “What do you make of this girl, Karl?” That was when Vickie noticed the man

who sat, or rather reclined, to the Major's left. He was a young man, his hand resting on the Major's thigh in a curiously intimate manner. He sat upright when addressed, and stared at Vickie as if she was a lab specimen. "What do you make of her, Peter?" His accent was an indolent transatlantic drawl. "Well, it is a puzzle. It's possible, I suppose, don't you think so, Joan?" "I didn't, sir, but if you say so." "Indeed I do! Time to get in touch with the General, I think." Joan Thompson stood, and walked over to where the two men sat. "Yes, sir, past time, I'd say. We've been here for a lot longer than we were told, the men and the women are starting to ask why we haven't seen any action. The longer we stay, the more we risk exposure, and "polluting the time line," which, you will recall, sir, is something we were instructed to avoid." "If the men are asking questions, Joan, then you must remind them of the rank structure. Theirs not to reason why, and all that. We have a task to perform and you will follow orders, as will they. Is that clear?" "Yes, sir. Meanwhile, I try to stay in character, which, with respect, would be easier if we looked more like a normal family." "Do you know the meaning of the word family in this locus, Captain?" "Sir." "Good. Wives obeyed their husbands, and they had power of life and death. I rather like that, don't you, Karl?" The man tittered, and Vickie realised what his place in this strange household was. There was more to it, of course - maybe he was one of the American agents Julia had alluded to.

Back with Julia Mayo, she spoke as they shelled peas on a back porch by the kitchen. It was a pleasant mindless task. "Have you met that man Karl? Where does he come into it?" "Too much, if you ask me." Julia was quiet while a man walked past with a load of vegetables in a barrow, then she continued. "He and the Major are lovers, so I'm told. He's an American, a friend of the General too, officially he's a liaison with the Yanks, but he's here a lot. Whenever the Major holds a party for the local power brokers, he's always the only other traveller. The captain's glad that etiquette here doesn't require her to attend! It gets pretty wild, so Steve's told me." "You call him Steve? I thought that was, what-do-you-call-it, fraternising, and not allowed." "We're stuck here." Julia rubbed her back, and sighed. "There's a wee bit fraternising going on, as you may find out, but not with the natives, no matter what Steve was hinting with Geminius the jeweller! I wonder what one or two of the women think they're playing at, if any of us got pregnant here, according to the briefing we had before we left, it wouldn't be a good idea. Contraceptives are another thing we're running out of." "I'd have thought there'd be something more permanent when you're from." Vickie's tone betrayed her longing, and Julia laughed. "Nay, you don't get away with that!" Her brown eyes were warm. "You didn't say when you're from, but I am sure I'd be polluting the time line if I let you know what it's like." "Long before you" Vickie sighed. "Not even a little hint?" "Not even. I'll just say that things are different, but not that different in that respect. Did the Major say what's to become of you?" "No. He just told the Captain to dismiss me as if I am one of her soldiers, and as I left, they started arguing. Again." "I almost wish something would happen, so we can see some action and go home!" "Be careful what you wish for!" Steve Cowley stood before them, and took a handful of shelled peas from a bowl. Julia slapped his hand away, as he sat on the step beside her. "The Major is talking about taking some of us to see the General, who's at Ostia, or so he says." "Some of us? Who?" He shrugged. "Probably not Madam Captain or you, Miss Dennison. Atkins, De Bono, and you, Kerry." "Me what?" It was the woman who'd eaten breakfast with Vickie and Julia, who came into the garden. "The Major is talking about taking a

bunch of us to Ostia to find the General. He's discussing it with the Captain and Karl McNee. "Is he here? He's so elegant, isn't he? It's so nice to see him and the Major together, isn't it? If only people were as accepting of homosexuality in our time as they are here!" "Yes, Kerry, of course." Julia's tone was wary. "It's certainly interesting. Are you two going to help us, or don't you have something you should be doing?" She made a gesture with her head as Kerry and Cowley left the garden. "I don't quite trust her," she said of Kerry. "She's very friendly with the Major, and some of us aren't quite happy with him." "He's going native?" Vickie prompted, but got only a "yes" in reply.

In the end it was two boring days of sitting in the reception room as the Major and the Captain received local visitors, sitting in the garden with Julia Mayo, being shadowed by someone wherever she went and having the chance to realise exactly what she missed most about the 21st century, before anything happened. Being a "mute" in front of any of the "natives" was getting pretty old, and she was considering revealing her bad Latin in defiance of Joan Thompson's orders, when Cowley came to the room where she and Julia were getting ready for bed. "Psst." "No, are you?" "Shut it!" He walked through the door, and Vickie hastily grabbed a blanket from the bed as he did so. He blushed, as Julia poked her tongue at him. "Sorry Vickie." He had finally stopped "Missing" her, though the Captain still spoke to her as formally as if she was a lawyer. "We're going somewhere." "You came to say farewell? How nice." Julia pulled her night-gown over her head, and sat on the bed. "No, I've come to get Vickie. You can wear trousers and a tunic, and tie your hair up. I don't suppose you can use a gun?" "What do you think! You said I wouldn't be going." "I didn't think you would. I should have known better." "What about me?" "Sorry, Julie, love. You get to stay here and deal with Madam Muck's temper. She's not happy about us taking Vickie here, but she's been over-ruled." "Are you happy about taking me, Mr Cowley?" "Not a bit of it. You're a kid and though you're obviously a bit touched, a nice one. There's nothing I like about any of this." "You use guns? Here? What happened to staying in character?" She had just realised what he'd said. "We don't wear them openly, in fact we've been ordered not to take them tonight, but I just wondered. Julie, where are her things?" "In the chest you're sitting on. Her own clothes?" "There might be something she can use." But in the end, there was nothing, and she wore trousers and a tunic authentic to the area of Gaul her character supposedly came from. Her tunic came down to her wrists and she was able to regain the watch she had missed so badly, and she slipped her cross necklace under the tunic. Julia helped her pile up her hair, using the modern clips and elastic with which she had arrived. "Can you ride a horse?" The Captain asked when she saw her. "Yes." "Good. Sergeant Cowley will look after you. Good luck." It was the warmest tone the captain had ever used, and Vickie wondered exactly what she would be riding into. In the road outside the villa, the Major waited with Karl McNee, the woman Kerry and one of the men. They were all on horseback, though all wore Roman dress. It was twilight, and gloomy as Steve Cowley came around the side of the house with a groom, both leading horses. Cowley helped Vickie to mount a filly, and mounted his own horse. At a signal from the Major, they road away. Vickie looked back at the villa. It had become a kind of home. Her plans had had to change. Henry Black had been almost forgotten, and as they rode through the night, it felt as if she had been here forever, and the life she had lived in 2005 was a strange illusion. It had been several years since she had last been on a

horse, but it didn't take long for her to get into the rhythm of riding and she had nothing to do but keep her seat and follow Cowley. Of all the people on this strange journey, he was the only one she trusted.

They had been riding for an hour and a half, when the Major signalled their arrival with an upraised hand. Ostia was a busy place, Rome's port and although the sun had set, waterfront drink shops spilled raucous people out in to the night. The Major led their little troupe along the waterfront to a line of warehouses, and Vickie rode ahead until she was level with Cowley. "He seems to know where he's going." "Yes, he does, and here, I thought we were going to find the General." The woman Kerry looked back at them, disapproval evident even in the way she sat. As they approached one particular warehouse, the Major and Karl dismounted, walking towards the door. It opened, and as the Major entered, Karl looked in, then called back. "Come on in, all of you. We've found what we wanted!" He sounded excited, and Vickie wondered why she heard something like triumph in his voice. As everyone dismounted, Cowley led the horses to a hitching rail, and so he was the last to enter the warehouse. Vickie was surprised that the building was so well-lit - she had got used to candles and oil lamps over the last three days, and yet it would have taken a chandelier to make the room so bright. Then she saw the lamps, and heard the hum of the generator powering the machinery in the centre of the cavernous space. Karl, the Major and a small bespectacled man stood arguing by a computer terminal to the right of a large sphere. Something about the man's untidy white hair seemed familiar... "Henry!" "Miss Vickie! So it is true, here you are. What a surprise! My allies are a little cross with me, and they did tell me they had thought of a way to make me mend my ways. I am so sorry you've been put to this inconvenience..." "Your allies are the little grey aliens?" "That's how they choose to present themselves." The Major said harshly. "This idiot here probably thinks that's what they really are." "You know the General?" Cowley didn't hide his surprise. "The only General he's associated with is General Mills. As in breakfast foods." Vickie replied. "He's my boss, Henry Black." "So, he is from 2005." Karl said, satisfied. "True to my theory, Peter, he's not in charge of anything." Henry pulled himself up to the 181 cm he had used to pride himself on when he was thirty years younger. "They are not my superior, these beings, they are my allies. They helped me with finding parts, and with refining one or two of my theories. In exchange, I was to travel to your time" he waved at the Major "and recruit you for a little task" "That task" said Cowley "hasn't been vouchsafed us. Instead we've been cooling our heels back here in AD 7 for months, and we want to go home. You" he turned to the Major, Peter, who was smiling in a way that made Vickie very uncomfortable "have no right to maroon us here. I may be a non-com but I know that much. We haven't been paid for months!" "Ordinary soldiers don't change." Karl said, with pretended sadness. "Griping is what they do. The way I see it, the chain of command puts you, sergeant and the rest of your troops at the bottom of this little enterprise. The Major is in charge of you, and as the General here is no such thing, we can count him out. Permanently. His allies will be easy to deal with - we know who and what they really are. Sorry, Henry, we're taking over this little operation." He produced a gun, and waved it at Henry, who stood, startled and probably for the first time in - how long, realising that the whole thing wasn't such rollicking good fun after all. "What do you want me to do?" "Disable this equipment, and disappear. That's all." "Oh no, not a bit of it!" Cowley stepped forward, his stance angry. "This is an Army operation. You, McNee are no part of it, and mutiny or not, we're going

home. All of us. Major, I'm relieving you of command. " "An Army operation? " The Major was laughing. The Ministry of Defence knows nothing about it. No one up the line knows a thing. You lot are all on manoeuvres, including Captain Thompson. If you don't agree to continue the masquerade at the villa indefinitely, you're going to meet with an unfortunate accident. It will probably involve a live firing exercise, yes, or an APC. " His tone was musing. "Karl and I like it here. Our - relationship is no barrier to whatever we want to do. Women know their place. Money rules. Yes, we've decided to stay. Shoot him, Karl. We can disable this ourselves. " Henry stepped back, as Karl walked towards him. The fear on the old man's face was palpable, and Vickie found herself running forward, shaking off Cowley's restraining hand. She dived toward Henry, threw him to the ground, as the gun went off, not with the roar she expected, but a soft 'pffft'. She felt a sting in her calf, a pain which became an instant agony. "Vickie! " It was Cowley's voice. Vickie lay atop Henry, who felt around for his glasses. "Am I shot? " He whispered. "No, you old codger, Vickie is. " Cowley knelt beside them, his face ashen. "You'll be all right, girl, it's just a flesh wound. I am so sorry! I didn't know any of this would happen. " "No reason why you should have". Vickie managed to sit, and wished she hadn't. She could see the little black-edged hole in the leg of her trousers, and the blood welling up. De Bono and Kerry stood back at the edge of the circle of light cast by the electric lamps, the man's face as shocked as those of Cowley and Henry. "Get up, Cowley, leave the girl and the old man. Miss Dennison, you've been silly and you're paying for it, but I commend your loyalty to your employer. I knew when I heard your story what was going on. All we need to do, is to avoid your boss's allies and we have an advantage he doesn't. In our time, we know their limits. Karl, let's get this all over with. Where are the tracers? " He spoke to Henry. "I don't know what you're talking about, Major. " "Of course you do. Your friends the galactic outlaws will have implanted one in you, and Dennison. I know my troops received them. Karl and his men, and I must have had them as well, and I want to know where. " "What tracers? " De Bono spoke for the first time. "Our vaccinations, correct? " Cowley answered him, and Henry nodded. "What about the others? You'd better tell him, Mr Black, or he'll shoot you and he won't miss this time. " "Sergeant Cowley, you do have a brain under that unimaginative Tommy Atkins exterior. Well, 'General' Black? Do tell me. " Karl sounded as if he would rather have shot the man. "In your clothes. My friends knew you wouldn't stand for the vaccination story. After all, you knew this wasn't an official UN mission. " "Well, that's not a problem. How many of your troops will want to stay here, do you think, sergeant? " "I don't think any of us wants to stay here. I know I don't. If you know what these beings are, what makes you think they'll let you? " "Because I know what they want. It happens to coincide quite neatly with what we want to do. " The Major's voice was full of satisfaction. "One hand washes the other. If you and Miss Dennison fail to return from our expedition to find the General, the rest of your men will do what I ask. They're only obeying a lawful order! How good of you to be positioned so well! " Karl raised his weapon again. "No! " De Bono yelled "you can't! " "I don't know" Kerry interrupted. "If the Major and Karl want to live here, with their relationship acknowledged, what harm..." "Because they're going to kill Steve, you silly cow! " De Bono seethed. "It's not just a gay rights issue! " "You're not armed" Karl sneered. "That's where you're wrong. " The shot rang out, that time, and echoed inside Vickie's head, as Karl's face exploded. The Major reached to his side, and Cowley, grabbing Karl's gun, shattered his wrist. "Thanks for being such an untrusting sod, Dave. " The Major stood, sobbing, clutching his arm. Karl's body lay on the floor, spouting blood from the head. Vickie felt faint. "Stay with me, Vickie. " Cowley said urgently. "Mr Black, 'General', is that thing the machine? " Henry nodded,

as if he didn't trust himself to speak. "Well, what are you waiting for? Power it up, get us back home." Outside, Vickie could hear shouts. The gunshot must have sounded like a rocket firing to the locals. They'd be coming in force. "Lock the door, Corporal Kerry," Henry said recovering his dignity. "That won't stop my friends, and they'll be here soon, because the tracers will tell them something's happened to Miss Dennison and the American Lieutenant. So, if we want to get out of here, we have to go quickly!" "But what about the others? I'm not going to leave them there in that hell-hole!" Vickie was surprised that she had the energy to protest, but she was finding it somewhere. "We'll go to 2090, and get some help for them. It's the only thing to do. Oh dear what a complete mess!" Henry's world had come to an end around him, and it was all he could do to start the machine. Kerry locked the door, and no first century authority could have broken in. Karl's body was moved to the back of the building, and the Major, unresisting, sat with it. De Bono watched him, while Vickie told Cowley how to help Henry start the sphere. She had never seen its 21st century counterpart working, and was amazed to find that this one did.

The year 2090 was a laboratory. It was his "other home", Henry told Vickie, the base from which he had travelled back forty-five years to recruit the Major, who he had at first believed to be just a mercenary discharged from the real armed forces following a war he wouldn't tell her about. In exchange for knowledge, his friends as he still called them, had asked him to provide troops for a task that needed doing. He brought Vickie and the Major medical help, and they sat cooling their heels, while only Henry, was free to move around. His friends, he explained, would be most cross at his polluting the time line by taking anyone forward of their own life line to that point. "What did you do with Karl's body?" Vickie asked Cowley, as they sat up on the cot Henry had provided. She had fainted as the time machine had started and had remembered nothing until the laboratory. "We set a fire in the warehouse, and blew it up. The Romans have no forensic science. They'll find nothing to excite them. I am afraid that the fire was spreading when we left." "We've changed history! Aren't there some kind of time police who are going to be very annoyed?" "The major was worried about that too." Cowley grinned wickedly, as he popped some chewing gum into his mouth. She declined the offer of some with a wave. "Honestly, so was I, but what could we do? If they discovered all that technology, that'd be a more radical change. Then I found this." From a table, he picked up a book, an encyclopaedia she recognised as being from 2004. He turned to the entry on Rome, and the section on Ostia. She was excited as she read about a fire which had destroyed a section of the docks in the year Ad 7. "It happened long before any of us was born." He reassured. "Yes. So you can't change history. Whatever the major and Karl wanted to do, wouldn't have worked. Do you know what it was they wanted?" "Yes. Kerry told me, because they had confided in her. That's why they chose her to go to Ostia. They believed that Christianity had caused homosexuality and abortion, and a few others things to be thought unacceptable, and they wanted to be there to stop it getting started. What Henry's friends wanted to do, we don't know, but it might have been related." The door to the lab opened, and Henry entered. "Ah. Are we well, Sergeant, Vickie? I have to send you both, also Mr De Bono and Miss Kerry back where you belong. I've been talking to the hmmm, authorities here, and they've agreed to let me do that, and to go to rescue your friends at the villa. Then I must destroy my machine. It turns out that my, er friends, are not what I thought them to be. Very foolish of me." "What will become of the Major?"

“The authorities will take care of him. And of me, I am afraid.” “Oh, no! What are they going to do to you?” “Well.” He sat on a chair he pulled up to the cot. “They’re quite enlightened, Miss Dennison, which is all I am able to tell you. I have to stay here, and not go back to 2005, which is a pity. I shall miss you and my family. But I know too much about what is properly speaking my future.” “But if history can’t be changed...” “What makes you think it can’t?” Along with sadness at missing Cowley and Julia, she carried thought that back with her.

Sentinel – or, If This Goes On.

A dark street, with fine cloud scudding across the moon. somewhere the roar of a car, and after it, a distant siren. Far off, a helicopter, and the distant bark of a gun. This city was becoming a scary place. Eastward, above the buildings dawn was breaking, as the small woman in the red coat and matching hat, let herself into her office building. Inside the foyer, a dim light shone above the lift. She tapped the call button with the tip of her nail. Somehow, the knowledge of what she planned to do, was stealing her confidence. No way to act, she told herself, as the lift creaked upward. On the second floor, the sun's first rays came in through the picture window of her boss's empty office, and encouraged, the woman walked towards the open door. 'Good morning, Miss Burton.' 'Oh!' 'Sorry, I startled you.' 'That's all... that's not a problem.' A mousy woman, a cleaner, towing a vacuum, and a trolley of cleaning equipment. 'Do I know you?' 'No, Miss Burton. However, I do read your column and I recognised your picture above it.' 'You read my column? Do tell the editor, I suspect he thinks that no one does!' Relief was making her loquacious. The cleaner bowed her head. 'That wouldn't mean much, coming from someone like me!' Something stopped Elise Burton from shrugging off the cleaner's words. 'The Sentinel is a paper for every'.. 'thinking person, I know,' said the other woman. 'However, they don't really mean people outside of a certain demographic. I read it at the hostel, the Co-ordinator gets a copy.' 'You live in a Hostel?' The woman bowed again. 'It's not so bad. I was a teacher, but I lost my position when my daughter was recommended for a scholarship, and she 'expressed unacceptable views' at the panel interview. It was decided that she should undergo a course, and I went with her. I agreed with a few things that she said, well, I would, wouldn't I? So, when she graduated, I had to stay. The placement I am on, is here'. She glanced at the clock, and at the sun coming in through Andrew's window. 'Goodness! I must be running late! I'm so sorry, excuse me..' 'No, please, I am early!' Elise checked her watch. 'It's only 7.15, I came in early to get something'. Please, go! She silently begged the woman, and as if she had been heard: 'Er.. I must get on. Thank you, Miss Burton.' 'Elise' she said impulsively. 'And you are, Mrs?..' 'Walsh, Linda,' As Linda trundled her cart away, Elise went into Andrew's office, and to his desk. The drawer was locked of course, but she was prepared with the code. She used a tissue folded in four, to press the keypad, and was in. (Latex gloves would be detected if anyone suspected that the file had been intercepted, but tissue paper could be flushed away, and would not show up on molecular scans). By 08.00, Elise had copied the flash drive and returned it, re-locking the drawer, and was sitting at her desk with a cup of coffee, by the time her colleagues came in. No one knew she had been here alone since 07.00 and she was safe. Within two days, the details of the American

Ambassador's meetings with government and selected media, had appeared on the 'Net. One potential false flag operation was exposed and one war averted in time. How many more to go? There was nothing to be done about that, - waging peace never ends. ### One cold Friday evening, Linda stopped in the dining room, as she passed the cleared tables. 'Miss Burton! What are you doing here?' Linda Walsh sat down opposite Elise, where she sat, eyes down, a cold cup of coffee in front of her, looking at her last column. She merely pointed at the words in bold along the bottom of the page. Elise Burton will be on indefinite leave as of next week. Watch out for a new Political Round-Up with Guy Chatterton, from the 26th. 'You got caught? I never told them that I saw you there that morning, even though they asked if we'd seen anyone go into Andrew Freeman's office.' 'No' Elise grinned. 'I know you didn't. The problem was my last column. I'm here to do a gender sensitivity training course. There were complaints of homophobia.' 'You said...' 'I know. I said that in my opinion, Christians ought to be allowed to hold their services without having to apply for a licence to have their material vetted even if they are open to the public.' 'But an LGBT person might innocently wander into a church and be offended!' Linda said in mock horror. 'How long will I be here?' Linda shrugged. 'Six months? I've been here 6 years, but I am not good at pretending any more. My daughter comes to see me sometimes, so it's not so bad.' 'Your daughter, how is she?' 'She's not pretending. She respects me, but she thinks I am wrong.' 'Six years!' 'Look at it this way. If they knew that you'd taken the Ambassador's briefing papers for the run up to the war on Indonesia, you'd be inside Guantanamo, and never see daylight again, you and your whole peace group!' 'Church.' 'Really? I can learn a lot from you Miss Burton, – we all can. If we're meek!' The Co-ordinator, in his office, read that day's Sentinel and wondered why his new charge, and the old recidivist, were laughing.

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