

Thunderbolts and Lightning

Short stories from Vbooks

By Vanda & Tom Denton

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www.vinctalin.com

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Think you know where you come from?

Think again.

**And when you think they've given you the answer dig deeper,
because they don't always tell the truth. They use propaganda,
torture, forced addiction, slavery. They commit genocide.**

They are waiting.

No need to watch.

Their system never fails.

They're bioengineers on a grand scale and at every level.

**They're not so different from us. In fact, the more you
discover, the more frightening the resemblance is.**

The fifteen books of The Vinctalin legacy are written in the third person and none has multiple narrators (although a number of our other books do.) If you would care to express a view of the various writing devices employed in these short stories we'd love to hear from you at www.vinctalin.com. Also, ratings and/or reviews for the books, particularly on Amazon, would be greatly appreciated. We ask only for your honest opinion both as feedback and to aid future readers in their choices.

Some of our novels from Vbooks

Pagan: The Rise of the Haliorunnae
& the sequel

Pagan: The Trials of the Haliorunnae

Think you know what witches are?

 Think again.

Forget toads and revenge.

Everything here is new.

Habitat

Imagine where the science of synthetic biology might lead. Now imagine you live in a safe haven. A place where every act, every thought you have, is governed by the rules. A place where the Keepers of the Rules maintain a serene ambience, for the good of all. A place where you are kept ignorant of the existence of monsters.

Except...

This place is not safe for you.

This is Outer Shell Engineer, Rhys Buchanan's, position. Isolated by choice, knowing his job description involves an underlying inevitability of an early, agonising death, he is beyond resentment.

There is only one free choice remaining.

The Smile

A young woman gradually comes to realise she has been the subject of a legitimization process in a violent male-dominated society. In order to make the subject of the enslavement of women accessible to the average reader I have created what I believe could be termed 'a good read'. I have deliberately omitted explicit descriptions of the most extreme abuse, avoiding gratuitous sex and violence, thus focusing more closely on the cruel, insidious and generational obliteration of the human rights of women. As a universal, timeless topic limited to no particular religious or political ideals, I have placed my character, Abrins Wife, in an anachronistic setting outside of particular historical periods and geographical locations.

Following Meltdown

The world population, traumatised by a series of pandemics, is finally brought to its knees through a craze of keeping Congo rats as pets.

Draconian laws in this earthy dystopian society of the near future, spur the Baker twins into killing their teacher during a history lesson. The notably taciturn vet, Gabriel Harrison who has been conscripted into teaching, is alerted too late to the terrible crime taking place in the school.

Harrison has remained in good health and been well fed through successive widespread ordeals. It is the murder of his colleague that

finally pricks his conscience, prompting him into helping a small group of vulnerable people.

Designated Conservation Zone

A secret organisation solves the problem of climate change. And humans are not high in their list of priorities. All else is balanced as a part of a global eco-system. This is a story of reversing and preventing the problems rather than one of living with the dire consequences of it. Except from the human perspective this is a holocaust.

Cacodaemus

This is the first in the Guy Edrich trilogy. The underlined names inform the reader of which character is narrating at any time.

Guy

As a child, I held a concept of another, a non-corporeal life which, as an adult, I could no longer perceive.

When I was left as the only willing defender of the human race, I began to grasp the concept of Parfait. I was hit by a tidal wave. A torrent of fluid motion I had no name for. It was beyond vocabulary.

Jerome

'There are millions of them all over the world.'

'No way,' I breathed.

'Oh yes!' she grinned, '*millions!* Can you imagine the mayhem they're causing? People will be hunted, mutilated and killed by demons.

Eventually a small human population will survive, hidden from the prowling devils. And we will come out of hiding to claim our slaves.'

List of titles in order:

Bacchus

A Harvest Less Ordinary

Water

Sanctuary

Life Class

Ivors Wife

Spliced Genes

Galleon

Sun and Moon

Walker's Incinerator

Giant Congo Rats

Tendanny

What Will You Be Doing Monday Evening?

Guilt

A Plague of Demons

Vinctalin

Wulpet

Becoming Me

The Vinctalin Invasion: Logs

Bacchus

They were throwing carcases on to the benches as usual when one that landed with a shlup captured my attention. It caught me off guard. Yes, even I can be shocked. What landed on the butcher's block was not a side of beef, but a woman's body. Naked. Obviously.

Yet, it wasn't that that disturbed me. This was not uncommon. What was unusual was that I recognised her. In fact, it wasn't many days earlier that I'd seen her walking around. Clothed.

Watching her being slapped on to the bench would not have become my problem, had Q P-S been doing his job effectively.

Needing to think, I dodged around to the back of the illegal slaughterhouse masquerading as a barn in the charming Yorkshire countryside. There I settled to more seriously assessing the results of Quentin Pilkington-Smythe's incompetence.

I have an ability. Intuition let's call it. A quality Q P-S lacked even the vaguest concept of.

It was reason, however, that had me tracking down the nature of the mess he could be landing me in. Q P-S's workforce, the men I'd many times watched butchering the cows, sheep and other species, were no one's average choppers and slicers. They worked in silence with no independent thinking, each performing the same repetitive task day in and day out. Q P-S had become lackadaisical in the keeping of their existence secret.

Human bodies were butchered in that illegal slaughterhouse and mixed with beef or lamb for pies as well as going into pet food. I'd fear Q P-S gave some to me if I ever ate the food he supplied. I also worried that his contact in the criminal world could know too much about us.

Several times in the past I'd hovered in the background when the buyers came. They were never allowed near the slaughterhouse, but they did go to the butchery. After the workers there had been sent home.

Milton always made a big fuss of me and talked to me. He asked inane questions such as: is this horse meat? Old zoo animals? Stray pets? It was the low price, giving him a sizeable profit margin, that let the cat out of the bag there.

He invariably added to that narrative: Bet you don't eat it. He was something of a concrete thinker, yet even he could see more of my worth than Quentin Pilkington-Smythe did.

There was for me, a constant undercurrent in my mind, of having picked the wrong side in this, a more than incidental, ancient war, rumbling beneath the surface of all human societies. So old, in fact, that both sides had lost the identity of their almost forgotten enemy. Q P-S was even further distanced from that, thus missing the principle purpose of our mysterious provider of a free, dependable workforce.

I frequently found myself making the peculiar comparison of normal men working with livestock in the pastures, with those slaughtering and butchering these farm animals, alongside other species. I'd see him out in the large expanses supervising the normal ones one minute and

then watch him with the others the next minute. The fool believed he could keep those two disparate worlds functioning in tandem, whilst losing sight of an imminent danger.

He owned an extensive acreage of meadow with huge, isolated barns set well away from any area the livestock workers operated in. Q P-S had an empire there. Too often I faced the truth of his tawdry lifestyle, painfully aware my companion was beneath me.

The buyers arrived on a weekly basis, driving past the fields of cows and sheep to the butchery where they bought packs of diced, mixed meats, purposefully ignorant of the undercurrents of this smooth-running enterprise. From Quentin's limited point of view, this was far too big an operation to allow a greedy developer to push us out.

I, on the other hand, was aware of one possible escape route that could lift me above all that was involved in my companionship to a fool with no class. No charisma.

I knew of a guy with class who would be worthy of my service. In my mind, I could see him. I wanted to be with him. He was brave and wise, and he was royal. A king in fact. A king I was born to be with. I'd have left Quentin Pilkington-Smythe for Jean-Louis Rusch, if I knew how to get to him. If I could figure that out, I'd have been out of there years ago. Q P-S would accuse me of going over to the enemy. I'd accuse him of being too stupid to hang on to me. The longer I remained there, the more I felt obliged to pay attention to the details of the mess he was dragging me into.

That woman's body, the last one slapped on to the butcher's bench and by no means the first human meat to enter the food chain from a certain Yorkshire farm, had an identity. She had a name: Ann Richards. She was a Councillor. She first made contact at the home where only Quentin and I lived.

We had help in that home: a cleaner but no cook. Quentin ate out or had food delivered. I got my own meals. So, when Ann Richards visited, he couldn't even offer her a cup of tea, unless she wanted it without milk. The man had no style. How hard would it have been to get some basic groceries delivered once a week even if he threw most of it out. All that money and he couldn't even offer the woman a cup of tea.

He wasn't to know that wasn't a problem. That is, not until after discussing the weather at length and after she got around to asking if he ever thought about selling some of his land. He might have been able to dig up a modicum of charm over a cup of tea, but all he could manage was to tell her bluntly he had no intention of selling. In the event, she was not even vaguely put off pursuing her real purpose for being in our home. With that I began studying her as closely as Quentin did.

You could cut the air with a knife. While she put that down to having hit the wall of farmland versus housing development Q P-S panicked over having his secret uncovered. Which was peanuts compared to what could be unleashed if she acquired a compulsory purchase order. He wasn't even thinking of that. I so needed to be in

contact with a mind that could factor in all possibilities in such a precarious situation as this, rather than murder her without thought for the consequences.

She was a Councillor whose husband owned a large house building firm. They had a vested interest in buying farmland. In time, not much time because people like her think they live by different rules from the rest of us, she began working on a method to force the sale. The government had demanded thousands of new houses be built in Yorkshire and were in the process of relaxing greenbelt rules.

This woman thought she was on to a winner. A killing. How ironic. She had no idea who this man was, she was leaning on. That he had far more to lose than a livestock farm.

Quentin Pilkington-Smythe's operation was enormous: the illegal slaughterhouse being only one of his side-lines. Those silent workmen were also employed in illegal mining operations. There were valuable deposits below the surface pastures no one had begun to imagine.

Above the surface in the huge, isolated barns and what appeared to be battery hen houses, there was even more for him to lose because that's where his slaves were housed. There was no way he could move all of that for any amount of money. And no way he could allow a stranger to go nosing about there.

A few days later, because of her persistence, Q P-S lured her back to our home by giving the hope he could be persuaded to sell. And again, had he been able to offer a cup of tea, a natural toxin would have brought the beginning of a more efficient ending to her proposal. Instead, he bludgeoned her with the poker, leaving fragments of bone and splatters of blood all over the scullery. No amount of scrubbing would get rid of her DNA there, should anyone turn up to investigate.

Ann and her husband Clive had been bribing people throughout the area to get their farming land off them, so when she went missing he would be suspicious of the last person believed to have seen her. The person Clive could well have his pal the Chief Constable of West Yorkshire Police, investigating.

Even then, the idiot did not move at speed, to deal with something much bigger than a murder charge. Oh no. He was considering running away to live in luxury by use of his offshore account.

That put me in the awkward position of approaching the slaves' queen because only she could lead the men off the land in the dead of night, when no one would see them going to a new hiding place.

I was obliged to take care of what the fatuous oaf hadn't taken into account or we'd both be exposed to a being far more dangerous than the Chief Constable of West Yorkshire. But I made up my mind over one thing: once I'd saved his bacon I was going over to the other side.

Unpredictable as she was, I could take no chances with this queen. Naturally, I knew exactly where her lair was. When I say exactly, I mean exactly. Q P-S knew who was housing her, but I'd cased that

complex manor house and knew precisely which room she occupied. Also, I could get to her without drawing attention.

There was no time to waste. I bounded across the fields, through the hamlets, and private gardens and cross-country, to that mansion and its vast estate.

Once there, I climbed a tree near her window and leapt from there to the stone sill, peering in through the window to watch her sitting on her throne. She was, as always, alone. She was ready to spawn. Her fertile men would be waiting in the next room, preparing the thermostatic water bath, where their sperm would fertilise her eggs. They'd kill me if they caught hold of me.

She'd be reluctant to leave at a time like this. More than reluctant.

There was only one way. She'd have to steal her men: the product of a five-year-old spawning. No way would stupid Q P-S give them to her even though that was his best hope of survival by that stage. By murdering the Councillor instead of creating an 'accident', with a body to be recovered, displaying all the signs of the unintentional ingestion of a natural contaminant, he'd risked exposing this entire secret world operating under the noses of humans.

For a moment, as I watched from outside the window, I doubted my ability to make contact with this human-looking woman but there was more animal in her than I'd given her credit for.

It was she who turned to see me, crouching on the old stone window ledge outside her room. It was she who made contact with me. It was she who grasped the entire story within seconds, and in the next few seconds issued orders to the fertile men to prepare a new place. A place earmarked for any emergency that might arise.

And it was she who threw up the sash window and flew from that second storey room, with me scurrying behind her.

It was just as well for Q P-S's sake that he'd know nothing of this until the morning. Then rather than being thankful, he'd be furious to find all his slaves had gone missing.

She was far swifter even than me. I watched from some distance still, while her shadowy drones followed her in a clumsy mass across the fields.

Though I tried, I couldn't catch up with them. My exhaustion was not natural. Not for me. She'd sapped my energy. Literally.

I'd hoped to search out Jean Louis-Rusch with the ability to make this offering. To be able to give him the location of one faction of his enemy. But the Gog was taking no chances. She disappeared from view and I was left with no clue as to the location of Gog and her Magog.

Still keen to become companion to the king of the haliorunnae, I considered I had much to offer him. Thus, I set out on a new path. One that would lead to the less elusive Lucia. A five-day, cross-country trek, catching and eating prey along the way, brought me to her home.

Interestingly, inside her house, as with Gog, Lucia, a being of an entirely different species, sensed my presence.

I chose to communicate very little to her. She already knew my worth. And my purpose. It was one that suited her well.

Weeks passed as I lived off the wildlife in her garden, before the opportunity arose. Then, at last, he came to her house.

She led the way into his presence. Oh, what a glorious presence! I felt his entire being flow over me, around me and through me, like a pleasing balm. I sat on the rug by the door, soaking him up, as he, man-shaped, lounged back in a sofa.

He was contemptuous of Lucia, 'Do you really think you can win me over with a cat?'

I was outraged. A cat! Just a cat! Me!

I pounced on to his knee, raised my paws to his shoulders, looked him directly in the eye and delivered a sure message: *I am Bacchus! A more handsome and gifted companion than you have ever known!*

I felt the inward smile he refused to concede to Lucia, who was in the process of telling him a truth she didn't realise he'd already accepted, 'You know as well as I do that a cat of this calibre chooses you.'

As our minds met, I basked in his delight. This king of the haliorunnae had never met a creature as accomplished as I. No one ever notices the ever-present cat collecting knowledge. I had a great deal of information concerning my old master, for this enemy of his.

*The story of Bacchus is based on Vanda M. Denton's **Pagan** novels. These two books feature ancient genetic development, parallel evolution, hive minds and a clandestine bid to take over the human world.*

Set in the present day, humanity is unwittingly approaching an apocalypse. The vast majority of people are unaware of an ancient war broiling and bubbling beneath the surface. An evil lurks at the heart of some of the most ordinary businesses around the world. There is talk of witches, ghosts and demons.

In the Pagan stories Jean-Louis Rusch finally accepts he was created for the purpose of defeating the enemy of the Haliorunnae but those who made him, expecting to control him, find they made him too well.

A Harvest Less Ordinary

Gorex Viy is a Guard of distinction, with ambitions for his personal life as well as his professional one. Yet in spite of intensive training, he could not have anticipated this. He had no ability to comprehend the talents of Roselli's people, and she no experience that could enable her to understand how he had arrived in her domain.

Gorex Viy

When we arrived at Dobetzlimen I was relieved to learn that I'd be taking charge of the landing craft rather than protecting festering Tendanny gerels. Though eager to breathe planet air I was in no hurry to take my ship down. No one had noticed my new relationship. I could spend time with Castel Henda without being accused of manipulating the rosters. Close to me in charge of surveillance, was Sharma Lee. 'No sign of Tajat activity. All Dobetzilems in our zone are most likely dead.' Before boarding this vessel, I'd told Castel to take care but he floated past me dropping a remark that effectively questioned the Emperor's judgement, 'Why can't we just number these poxin worlds?' My grimaced response to a criticism Sharma hadn't heard, made her curious.

Orders came through all too soon. We were to take the ship down and prepare the incinerators. I told my crew to grab hold of something, and began the descent. There was turbulence when we passed through the stratosphere but no one landed on their rump. As for the bruising incurred from buffeting into fixtures, well, they heal soon enough.

Sharma gave me the old glance that told me I could have made the ride smoother, before looking to Castel who was rubbing his hip. I should have known she'd guess there was somebody new in my life.

There was nothing about our arrival to suggest aberrant Tajats dwelt here. I had Guards outside preparing conveyers when the first group of Tendanny, staggering atop a flatback travelling at speed, came hurtling towards us.

'What in the name of all vile festering royals...'

'Shut up, Castel! You'll be heard!'

Sharma stepped closer to us, moments before the vehicle came to an abrupt halt, spilling half its passengers in varying states of unbalance. She spoke to the Tendanny scum. 'Whatever stinking effluence you think you saw...'

The crew leader did not make eye-contact but he did speak up with uncharacteristic firmness, 'They are armed.'

I pushed past Sharma, aware she'd quarrel rather than get to the point. 'Sir,' the crew leader, knowing me of old, addressed me directly. 'My lord, there are hundreds of them. Our weapons have no effect on them. Our supporting Guards have requested aid.'

I eyed the man fiercely, searching for a sign of cowardice, and on seeing none sought information. 'The Guards' weapons are effective?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Very well. Stay in the ship.' I hailed my crew of Guards with their superior weapon power and hoisted a fit young male Tendanny out of the group. 'Show us the way.' The idiot was terrified. 'Now! And run you dim-witted gerel turd!'

I wanted to appoint Castel the Guard to stay safely with the ship but it would be the wrong operational choice. It had to be a Second Echelon because I must take all First Echelons with me due to our armour. Indeed, that was the specific purpose of our particular uniforms. And also, though not armoured, the whole point of Second Echelons with Castel's level of bio-engineering, was that he could assess the technological nature of the enemy's equipment. I'd be a fool not to have him help me expedite matters here. I am not a fool. So, instead of Castel, I left a young female with good implants but little practical experience. She was brimming with confidence when we left her in charge of Tendanny who had no immediate purpose. I judged she'd lose that smug smile within the hour.

We thundered after the Tendanny boy, some flanking him with annoyance for his non-enhanced slow progress. We seemed to be heading for a sheer rock face until Castel, with his specialised implants, called for us to take cover.

I had never before seen such advanced weaponry on a harvest. Even so, even then, I took this as nothing more than mild vexation. Tajats were sending bolts of fiery energy from their hiding places in the tall rock face, and the three Guards holding their positions had made no impact. They could hardly break cover to fire on the subhumans because that wide spray covered a large area. There were scorched Tendanny bodies spread around the sparsely-grassed, stony ground. What Castel had spotted was movement of weapons glinting post-firing, in the shadows. They adjusted the direction of their fire, aiming at us. Only one of us lacked the speed in heeding Castel's warning: the Tendanny boy.

Now I had a situation where expertly trained Guards were hiding behind boulders like gerels, and no sign of the enemy. Castel, naturally, had dived behind the same rock as me.

'Can you see anything?'

'There are slits in the rock face.'

Sharma Lee scrabbled across to join us. It could have been an impulsive move and if there was anything I knew well about the mother of my daughter it was that she loved danger with too little regard for consequences personal to her. She was lucky. She did not draw fire.

'Slits?'

Castel did not immediately respond to her question. He had his emerald implant working. We waited a moment.

'Only just wide enough for a Guard to pass through.'

I huffed. 'Well, we know they're not giants then.'

I stepped out. Straight and proud. No not reckless, as Sharma would call me, because I was now prepared to dodge fire I could calculate the rate of. My First Echelons joined me, ready to learn from me or die.

And when there still was no reaction we marched forward, with the Second Echelons following behind our line of burnished armour.

Closer now, we could see the narrow openings those walking corpses had slipped into. Cowards hiding. Easy game.

There being no response to our advance we took up places against the rock face with both First and Second Echelons using all implants and natural experience to examine the entrances for booby-traps. There being nothing other than the silicates we'd found in our general surveillance of this specific area, I sidled carefully through with my small and deceptively powerful weapon taking lead in my right hand.

With no reaction to half my body exposed in a cavern, I carried on through, noting in my peripheral vision that my fellows also were making ingress along the wall of what proved to be a long, highly polished, garishly coloured, empty, gallery. That is, it was empty of Tajats but sparingly furnished with artefacts ranging from domestic furniture to ornaments I had difficulty identifying. Most telling of all was that their weapons were scattered on the floor where they'd been dropped.

A number of us looked up. Above our heads was a ceiling, ornately adorned with glittering works of art but with no dull Tajats clinging to alien equipment up there. We spread out, studying the place for secret escape routes and that's the last thing I remember. Until now.

Roselli

The fern fronds were healthy, the moss plump and worms were rising to the surface. This should be a good harvest. Already families were preparing their preserving caves. Competition for best chef of the winter was highly contested, yet Ty stood out. I could hardly wait to see if he'd live up to expectations in this coming season or if, oh how exciting, one or even two others had kept talents hidden and planned to surprise, hum no, totally shock us!

Those were the thoughts I went to bed with. Not thoughts of sufficient concern to wake me before dawn. During the night, a wariness crept through the mild stirring of my mind. We had much that other settlements coveted. I sat and clapped my hands, activating the bioluminescent plants that I cultivated in my living chambers. There was no danger within our settlement. However, once awake and concentrating, I located an unknown danger in the outside world.

I called my servant, telling her to go outside and check the soil. She was confused, since it was not yet light. Obviously, she obeyed all the same. Less obviously, she did not return. I sent two more servants and when they failed to come back to me I spread word through the sleeping quarters for all my people to pick up arms and, moving through the tunnels only, make their way to the Temple. We were under attack. Most likely an enemy was stealing our precious relics from the Temple at the north side, believing they had us pinned down here in the south.

It was dawn by the time we reached the Temple and there witnessed the strangest sight ever. Five gleaming people, unlike any

enemy I'd ever seen before, were wandering in the sacred space. Others of the same race were entering slowly through the holy portals. Though not even studying our cherished idols and art, this was sacrilege. Someone said they were angels.

I said, 'In that case they won't snassing die when I fire on them.'

My first target fell to the ground stone dead while her cohorts swung around to fire back.

I said, 'They're trying to kill us with ineffective weapons. How snassing angelic is that?'

So, we fired on the others and watched them scramble and fight for the narrow exits. We followed and killed a whole lot more before the rest escaped. We watched them float away on a vehicle I'd never even imagined before, to a massive new landmark, probably an airship. Equally foreign. I knew about other settlements in the world. None had that technology.

Two of the imposters, different from the others, remained behind. They differed in their size and their clothing. They were not only bigger but patently much stronger. I believe the gold torso and trunk covering was supposed to be armoured. Either way it was poor snassing protection from our weapons.

There was a problem in that, by then, we'd taken on combat form and had to stay like that as I gave orders to have bodies removed from the Temple. That's tricky in this form. But it did add confusion to those who knew us not at all. I'd begun to get the upper hand when, snass it, some of the other snassing intruders emerged from the airship. More of the big ones in turquoise and gold. They came charging across the Vale of Desolation and so we went on the defensive, merging as well as we could with the outside scenery while I called a hasty retreat to a stronger holding position.

Inside the Temple I ordered half my people to drop all weapons that could not be camouflaged, and merge. I sent the other half back through the tunnels for fear of a coordinated attack from the south.

As I took up my place, I felt the enemy closing in on our sacred space. When I sensed outrage in my fellows, I calmed them. These were beings at great variance from ourselves. My mind must be free to study them in order to remove them from our domain.

Their senses were not alien, other than being limited. Their eyes, like ours, searched their surroundings, but they saw only the surface. My camouflage, for example, involved nothing more than merging with a set of decorated urns and pillars. The veil across the portals to the tunnels was merely a continuation of murals on the walls. Their ears heard one another's whispers but not one heard the exchanges amongst my people.

Neither did they hear us laugh when the ones wearing purple came in with their technical equipment, trying to measure snass knows what because I'd put a mental shroud on everything except silica. Unable to cope with the confusion they turned their emotional dials to anger. We laughed harder. Anger is the easiest emotion to turn against plodding

creatures such as these. And the more we paralysed them the angrier they became. They couldn't even slide the jewel to fire their snassing weapons!

Gorex Viy

I don't fully understand what has happened here. I remember entering the gallery. Within minutes I knew we were in a realm we could not comprehend. I had time to run an assessment of my implants, found nothing amiss within me and realised there was a physical force at work, paralysing me where I stood. But that is all. Now I float in memories.

Here is my daughter Sharex Vee taking part in her first competition, two years early. This is not pride. As her father, I do what is honourable and what is right, to be certain she will have the longest life possible. Sharex, like her mother, is wilful. Sharma Lee has the attention of a royal male. He will take her for a lover. I can do nothing about that but I will be sure Sharex does not fall into the same danger.

Thus, I impose harsh discipline, to make her strong, and obedient. At only fourteen she will beat sixteen-year-old males. She won't win the competition but she will rise above many sixteen-year-olds, in their own calculations. She complains. But cooperates well enough.

And now I see Castel Henda. Oh my heart, Castel. How I loved you. Why did you do it? He touched an ornament on the wall, gasped a reaction to something I couldn't see, and fell. I could tell he was dead. I have seen too many corpses in my life. He died with words on his lips. It was '*There's someone here. I...*' Oh, I can't remember your words Castel! My Love!

As my sapphire implant reactivates I remember I once had other bio-technology. Now I can hear voices being translated within the inner working of this implant. One comes over clearer than the others. Others that are apologising for speaking over one called Roselli.

Now she is clear. 'Who are you?'

I should not reply so easily. It seems I have no control over my implant.
'I am Gorex Viy.'

'From?'

I genuinely don't know the answer. To me it is a false question. Yet it has awakened curiosity within me. I have known the origin of every race of Tajats, obviously. We harvest them.

Roselli hears all of this. 'Your concept of '*Tajat*' is insulting. Also amusing, considering your lamentable lack of self-knowledge.'

Unable to suppress thoughts concerning the safety of my daughter, I now fear she has located my greatest, my only, weakness.

'There are others of your kind in the mound.'

Concepts flash through from geographical features to my landing craft.
'Landing from where?'

Now I am giving her the image and name of our vast transporters that house the landing crafts and so much more.

'The cosmos?'

She is curiously unbelieving considering her hold over me.

'How many more of you are there?'

'Tens of thousands.' No lie. No idle threat. Yet a truth that terrifies her.

'Will they come?'

'Oh yes. You are ripe for harvest.'

Water

This story is associated with The Vinctalin Legacy: Legacy, which is a stand-alone novel uniquely connected to the Vinctalin Legacy fifteen book series. A further link to the novel accompanying the Vinctalin series, is in the form of the sects that humanity has separated into in this future earth: Piltonian, Byefield, Stanzini etc. All narrators in this story are Stanzinis. There is a little surprise here for you: if you read the series and the novel associated with this story you will discover that the characteristic language of the Stanzinis is taken from their historic hero, Benjamin Stanzini. As a point of interest, the Vinctalin Legacy: Legacy is not told in a multiple narrative style.

Sid

We've walked across the desert into what is, arguably, Piltonian territory. There are six of us. We'll show up as an expeditionary force to any sentry keeping watch through a new Byefield telescope. We all are aware that Piltonian warriors train in the most barren of lands. However, I'm in full agreement with Ben, who came this way with just one scout, charting this route. Piltonians are not explorers. Neither do they think and plan long term. If we don't reach the opening in the low outcrop a Stanzini somewhere, will find another. I'm not too modest to hope that Stanzini will be me.

Leona

If we don't die from heatstroke or dehydration, we'll be killed by bloody Piltonians before we even reach what has been described as a bloody crack in the rocks. A crack in the rocks is not a bloody tunnel never mind a tunnel leading to water that probably doesn't exist anyway. I could kill bloody Ben for forcing me to take part in this suicide mission.

Winston

I can see Leona winding herself up again, instead of keeping a look out for Piltonians.

Vera

At the sudden, tiny, distant glint of sun on glass I raise my hand and sweep it down. Everyone falls face down into the sand with me. There should be silence but Leona is grumbling. Winston tells her to shut up. She has to swear once more, about Ben. At least she's broadly following the procedure we've trained long and hard to pull off smoothly.

Frank

Whenever we enter flat desert territory belonging to other sects we walk abreast so that silent hand signals can be seen by all. I don't know what

Vera saw, or where. She's ready for my unspoken question and points in the direction of far-off sand dunes. That's a place where Piltonians could be hiding. As best as I can manage whilst prone, I search the area through my new Byefield telescope. And cease abruptly. There's no movement but there is a small flash of sunlight off glass. The lens of my telescope could be telling a dangerous rival what he or she might be telling me.

Tilda

This is a ridiculous bloody state of affairs. Here we are, scorching our faces in the sand when we're merely trying to find what everyone else on this planet needs: water. Why can't the bloody Piltonians simply work with us? If we do find water right out here and there's not enough for all of us, we can hardly cart it secretly back to Stepney. It would be theirs anyway. Except they're not even surveying in the way Ben is. And if there's a lot, there's enough for all of us. Makes me bloody sick!

Frank

I don't think there's anyone there. We can't stay in this heat all day. If we wait too long we'll lose our place, navigating by the sun as we are. I'm going to order that we move on whilst being prepared for battle.

Sid

At least Frank isn't scared of his own bloody shadow. Now we have the signal to move on, with arms at the ready. More tiring in these conditions than having the swords strapped to our backs, yet reassuring.

As per training, we rise first to one knee whilst drawing our swords, then to our feet, using our spears for support. The first few steps, ungainly in the fine, dry sand, are taken warily, with all eyes darting in all directions.

Leona's bloody moaning again. Trying to tell Frank we should turn back. Stupid cow. That's just as dangerous as going on.

Frank

Bloody hell! How the hell could they get so close! Suddenly I'm fighting for my life. I didn't see them coming! It took too many seconds for the shock of their war cries to register through that intended disorientation.

Tilda

What the hell is this? They've come on us like a swarm of squealing rats caught up in a sandstorm. Fierce bloody warriors flying around us like spooked bats. Shit! I don't think we can beat them.

Winston

Get a grip you prat, Winston! You've trained for this. You'll get one of them before you die!

Leona

I want to drop my weapons and surrender but I don't think they'll take prisoners.

Vera

Their leader is screaming like a bloody Vinctalin. That one is mine. I'm pushing past Frank to get to the git. He's hurtling towards us with knives in each hand. The explosive weapons they're famed for are not being taken from their belts. A fair fight then.

He's sure-footed, dancing on this sand, rising, spinning in the air, slicing across me as he passes. My adrenalin pumps, my own battle cries match his and, though less elegant, I rise and turn to meet him. His fist is cutting up. The blade intended for my kidney is now speeding toward my gut. I bend in the middle, pulling my stomach centimetres clear from the blade but now too close to use either spear or sword effectively. Instead, as I sail past him, I strike the back of his head with the hilt of my sword.

We are facing one another as we touch the ground simultaneously. He is immediately moving in for the close-quarters combat of his short knives and I make some distance to attempt a strike with my sword. That he ducks and dodges and is again within arm's reach. Again, I retreat in clumsy jumps on the treacherous ground.

He is relentless. As am I, though less obviously so. By making myself appear weak, stumbling backwards in territory that is his basic training ground, I instil in him an over-confidence. He rushes forward, thinking more of finishing this quickly than of tactics. I throw myself to his feet, thrusting the sword upwards. That's only a gash across the collar bone but it's also a moment's hesitation. Long enough to skewer him on my spear.

Winston

I didn't see where they came from but the Piltonian dashing towards me has sand streaming off her. Her voice, added to the cacophony of the onslaught, is supposed to disorientate me. Perhaps they even believe they'll frighten us. Maybe they don't recognise Stanzini soldiers. No doubt, they're as keen to test out their skills in an actual battle as we normally are.

She comes at me in organised frenzy, slashing the longer blade in her left hand from side to side, close to cutting my shoulders and arms, whilst keeping the stiletto in her right hand for a jab to my torso. We battle, clashing blades, reeling in uncertain footholds, growling and screaming until we see one warrior fall. Vera's opponent is crawling in the sand, and bleeding out.

The bloody spear she has retrieved is testament to what will be a fatal injury. She has fought hard enough to be winded. Not yet able to aid in my fight.

Though all of that is absorbed in less than a second my attention, stupidly, is diverted long enough for my assailant to make a shallow cut in

the arm I am too slow in moving. Her jabbing hand does not, however, get near my belly. Instead, I have hold of both her wrists as I bring my knee up into her solar plexus. As she drops, her breath in spasm, I look around quickly, eyes darting from one evenly-matched struggle to another.

Sid

They were in the sand! Actually lying under the bloody sand! Raving mad, wild, bloody Piltonians emerging from beneath the ground all around us.

I'd fallen one step back from our advancing line and saw what my comrades didn't. They rose up out of the ground we'd walked across and sped in to take out our flanks. The noise of their famous battle cries added to the confusion.

One is engaged in battle with Vera and one with Winston. That's all I know just now, because I'm defending myself from the one trying to kill me.

Leona

I can almost hear Ben's voice shouting at me, '*There are only bloody four of them! You don't even need to kill the buggers!*' It's alright for him. He has no sense of fear. By hanging back, I haven't engaged one yet. But Tilda has noticed me so I'll have to make it look like I'm helping. I do that by making a point of looking out for more Piltonian warriors. It should send the message that even Frank hasn't thought to do that. It has the added advantage of my being able to legitimately get some distance between the battle and myself.

Tilda

I am going to kill this Piltonian truce-breaking git! He might be able to dodge my long blade but every time he thinks he'll skip to my back I'm already turning. I will kill the bugger because I know now that reflected flash of light was all part of the bloody ambush and I'm the one who had us bloody diving.

'Vinctalin traitor!' I scream into the piercing tempest while thrusting furiously with my sword. 'Sneaking dog!' I roar as I leap back and graze my spearhead across his face. 'Stinking truce-breaker!' I yell, swinging my sword whilst advancing. 'Bloody hell!' I cry as I crash face-down in the bloody sand, my feet swept from under me as his knife grazes my hip when I roll only just fast enough.

Frank

I can't get this bugger to back off far enough to assess the situation. I do know that Leona's looking out to make sure there'll be no bloody Piltonian reinforcements, Vera is winded and Sid is in trouble. I'm trying to get the shite to stop stabbing at me and talk. That's bloody hard when all your breath is being used in self-defence. At least I've drawn the git away from Tilda. He'd have killed her otherwise.

Vera is advancing now, ready to throw her javelin. I have to bellow an order everyone else can hear breaking through the anarchic racket. Ordering her not to kill this one is feeling too much like bloody submitting, but it has to be done.

All fights are slowing. I must try to end this without further bloodshed.

'Bloody pack it in! All of you!'

No one so much as hiccups.

'I am ordering all Stanzinis to defend only!'

Winston is trying to obey. So is Vera, now taking all the attention of my attacker.

'Tilda! Obey my buggering order!'

There's a slowdown. I march over to the one attacking Sid, ready for the daggers that could well come my way.

'We're supposed to have a bloody truce! What the hell are you doing?'

He sinks his knife into Sid's stomach. I want to kill the bugger but all others have slowed right down, waiting for my reaction.

My choice is to help Sid to the ground before he falls.

I can hear Winston's fury on the rise again. 'You'll **all** die for that!'

The three living ones have moved together in a defensive triangle.

They have a spokesman. 'You killed first!'

Vera defends her action, 'You bloody attacked us! Bastards!'

We have a mission far more important even than two lives lost out in the desert. I tell them this. I also tell them we will kill them all if we don't see them retreating. Now.

They save face, they think, by moving away slowly, without turning their backs. As though they believe we would attack them from behind. Bloody gits!

While they're doing that I recalculate for the lost time, with the sun now high in the sky.

Once again, I have my soldiers marching abreast in accordance with my leadership. Only Leona continues to check that the Piltonians are still walking away. All of us, every one of us, is coping with the personal guilt of having left Sid to a gruesome, lingering and lonely death.

Vera

We've all spent time trying to focus on a hazy horizon whilst trudging along at Frank's demanding pace. And we all now look to one another with confidence. That is definitely rock ahead. It will be the cliff face charted by Ben. Frank's navigation will be accurate. We will arrive at a crack in the stone wall. We will, at the very least, get out of this baking, blistering, killing bloody sun.

Leona

I was the only one with the sense to keep watching the Piltonians until the horizon separated us from them. Even I'm bloody grateful to look ahead now and see the gap in the rock face. I ran out of skin protection a long

way back. Each of the others has allowed me a little of theirs, always accompanied by a lecture that had to include how low my water bottle was getting.

I'm furious! I've never been so bloody angry! They're all rejoicing in getting out of this hellfire soon, without one thought about the journey back.

Vera

I'm the first one in, bent almost double, feeling the fabulously cool shade and calling a warning back to the others, 'There's loose rubble underfoot. Don't bloody break anything. It's as low and narrow as hell, so don't bang your heads or cut your shoulders.'

Most of our water, especially by the coast at Ben's command town of Stepney, is purified from sea water. We also have wells in our inland towns and villages. Ben's theory is that there are huge underground aquifers to be found. It makes sense. And if we can find them we can live a life without water rationing. One where we don't have to drill haphazardly for a new supply when we close down the dried-up wells. One where we can irrigate crops and make new soil.

I'm moving along this narrow, treacherous, steep downhill passageway, grateful for the long life of the new Byefield torch.

Winston

Vera's doing a good job with the torch but we could do with one each. I understand Ben's unspoken reasoning. By the time anyone gets back to Stepney, there will be more than one each. That means one or two survivors carrying three torches and two telescopes. They're far too valuable, too hard come by, to leave any behind.

Just slipped on the dry gravel but I'm OK. Bit of a graze, but OK.

Tilda

I'm trying to shine the light to help Winston as well as for myself. Frank is bringing up the rear, making a constant light on the straight areas but this bend is a bugger. Winston and Leona are stumbling through sections of darkness which could be critical in these conditions. Overhead rocks are cracking and creaking from our disturbance here. Winston lost his footing on the stones and almost caused a cave-in. I think in reality, only a few small fragments fell but I don't know if anyone was hurt. Didn't hear anything to suggest they were. Leona's moaning but that doesn't mean anything. Ben had to shame her into coming on this expedition and I don't trust her at all.

I hope Frank calls for a break soon.

Leona

Tilda's got a torch, naturally. Naturally, I haven't. I'm the only one pressed into this dumb mission. The others, idiots, volunteered. Ben's making an

example of me. The bugger told me, in front of friends, that if I was too cowardly to join this expedition, I was being disloyal to all Stanzinis.

Tilda

Bloody hell! Winston's fallen! I can tell by the cries he's broken something. I know, even as I rush as best I can, to his aid, all the consequences of this. And so does he. Bugger!

Vera

I know that kind of pain. I'm not supposed to turn back but I do. I can't leave Winston there without trying, at least, to ease his agony. He's too heavy for Tilda alone. It's his leg. The femur, of all things. I can't bear his pleas to not be touched, yet we have to straighten his leg.

At last we've got Winston propped up and his leg eased a little. Can there be hope we'll take him back with us on the return trip?

Frank

They can't see how hard this is for me but I'll do my duty no matter the price. I've had each of them, except Leona of course, pour a little of their water into Winston's flask. He's more than a hundred metres behind us now but I can still hear him crying.

'Break time.'

There's a lot of sighing but I had to wait for a straight length with a safer area of roof. I'd imagined coming to a wider tunnel where we could sit sideways but we're sitting in a row, staring at one another's backs.

Leona

I'm not a bloody traitor! I'm a realist. We are managing a decent standard of life the way things are. Ben always has to push for something spectacular. And look what that got! Look what he's done to Winston! I will get back. And I will make sure everyone understands the dangers of his leadership. As well as the stupidity of his theory on water.

Vera

At last, I can stand upright. My spine is grating painfully. I can see something ahead in the torchlight. Something bloody moving.

Leona

He could have given me a bloody torch instead of changing the order we're walking, well scrambling, in. At least I'm not being tormented by Winston's pained sobbing anymore.

Why the hell has Vera stopped? Let's hope it's a dead end.

Tilda

Great to have the extra height in the tunnel at last but my back isn't yet benefiting as much as I could have hoped. I couldn't have left Winston as he was but Frank was right in one respect. I think I have damaged myself:

strained something. Probably something that was weakened by walking in a crouch all that way.

The tunnel is widening and less steep now, which is easing some of the knee pain. I guess it's the change in surroundings that has Vera and Leona standing side by side, waiting for Frank and me to catch up to them.

Frank

Leona's water's gone. She daren't ask for more. I can't give her any of mine and I've ordered Vera not to either. Of the six of us who set out on this mission, one of us two is the most likely to make it back. Whether the news is good or bad, Ben must be given every piece of information possible to plan for the future. I've got kids. I want them to have a good supply of water and so, a better life than I've had. I'd like to think that the sight of a bloody great pool of fresh water is what's got the three women crowded together but I reckon I'd be approaching more bloody excitement than I am, if that was the case.

Vera

Tilda has pointed out that although they might be poisonous, this wriggling mass of bloody snakes is getting water from somewhere.

Tilda

We haven't seen so much as a damp patch, or the smallest offshoot from this tunnel, so it's likely those snakes are getting their water from somewhere ahead of us. We're going to have to get past them.

Leona

Tilda and Vera are complete bloody prats. Who knows how the biology of these serpents keeps them alive? Yes, there might be a little moisture of some kind around here. That could be all the foul bloody things need to stay alive. They're bound to be bloody poisonous and there could be millions of the buggers living in this tunnel for the next kilometre or more. With no useful quantity of bloody water on the other side of them!

Frank

Mmm, this is looking hopeful. My choices are not brilliant. I can't risk Vera yet, and Leona's useless, so it has to be Tilda. She's been limping and holding her back since we left Winston, so she's already weakened.

The writhing creatures have begun slithering away from our torchlight. They coil around each other, constricting and biting their own kind, which is particularly vile, and leaving them dead. But they haven't yet shown any interest in us. So, the plan has made itself.

Tilda

I knew it would have to be me. I'm glad I made my peace with my sister before leaving Stepney. Maybe I'll even make it back to her.

Slowly, slowly, giving them time to squirm away from the beam, I can more or less make a path through them. I daren't move the beam up and away from them to see if this ghastly infestation is coming to an end. I have to concentrate only on the ground near my feet because I'm having to step carefully into the spaces being created amidst them.

Vera

Bloody ghoulish, bloody wriggling, bloody gits. I hate bloody snakes. It couldn't have been bloody rats could it?

My hand's shaking but I'm managing to use the torch beam to further clear the path Tilda's making. I can almost see steam rising from her head, she's concentrating so hard. So hard, in fact, that she hasn't looked up.

Leona

They're on the bloody roof of the bloody tunnel. And they're getting bloody bigger. As thick as my arm and twice the length of my sword. Frank's a total bloody git. This is where I'd turn and go back, if he wasn't right behind me. He bloody knows that.

Frank

Bloody horrible buggering slimy creatures! Vera's sliced through one dropping from the roof, before it reached Tilda. But two more landed on her. They wouldn't bite if she wasn't panicking and thrashing out at them. Vera's keeping her head, killing only when necessary. And she's keeping her beam on the ground well enough for me to do the rest. Leona has been both frozen and looking for the chance to run, but with my hand on the back of her clammy neck now, she's being forced to keep moving.

Vera

She was bound to get bitten, clattering around like that. I counted three bites, going by her three howls of pain and terror, before she fell into the wriggling pile of them at one side of the tunnel. They had her buried in that squirming bloody heap even before I passed her.

Leona

I managed to grab the torch she dropped and can look where I want to look now. What I'm seeing is only a few serpents slithering off through cracks above, below and to both sides of us.

Frank

I've got snakes in my bloody head even though they're not bloody here anymore. I've also got Tilda's writhing, agonised body in there. Vera's pushing on with care and no way is Leona going to turn back now. In fact, if there's no alternative route out of here, I can picture her opting to never leave rather than go through that lot again.

Vera

What the hell is that noise? Not thunder way down here. There's a crashing, pounding, booming racket echoing from some way ahead of us. And it's not like anything we've ever known.

Leona

I've pulled up alongside Vera. This sounds like some other horde of bloody animals heading our way. Huge bloody buggers.

Frank

Sounds like a plane, a bit. Well, not really a motor, I guess. I can't tie it to anything. There's only one way to find out. I signal to Vera to advance with care.

Vera

Like I needed the signal for caution!

Leona

While she moves forward tentatively, I hang back. That is, until Frank pokes me in the back. It makes me squeal, the bloody idiot. I could be exciting some horrendous bloody monsters. Turns out I didn't though. What the hell?

Frank

Vera's laughing! Loudly! Either we're not facing our doom or she's totally bloody lost it.

Vera

That ever-increasing grinding rumble could have been anything from a herd of rampaging beasts to a Piltonian power-base with a wide-open entrance from the other side of this rocky outcrop. But it isn't. What it is, is bloody glorious! Fantastic! Epic! Phenomenal! Hell, there isn't a word to cover this!

Leona

Bloody unbelievable.

Frank

I can't take my eyes off it. The power of it. The tremendous volume of it resounding along its immense course. I have never in my mind imagined anything even close to this.

Shit!

Leona!

She's planning to try climbing down a slick cliff.

Leona! Get your arse back here before you kill yourself!

Bloody hell!

Vera

I'm having to hold Frank back. She'll drag him over with her.

Leona!

I'm trying to keep calm.

Wait for us to help!

Oh bugger! Bloody hell!

Frank

She's falling. We can hardly hear her screams above the roar of water surging through the massive tunnel below. We've lost sight of her. Bloody hell! After a lifetime of thirst, of all the bloody ways to die. You couldn't bloody make it up. I didn't hate the stupid woman. I'm having to work at not imagining her horror as I turn the torch beam on my last surviving companion. Vera has closed her gaping mouth and is already moving on with the mission.

Vera

We have to know whether or not this is salt water. That's easy. The flow is so violent that it's sending spray up the steep sides of the channel it spent millions of years cutting. If Frank holds me, I can reach down far enough to taste it.

Frank

Fresh water! I could never have guessed there was so much of it. No, not even with Ben's insistent reasoning. I couldn't dare hope it wasn't connected to the sea. It's fresh. Bloody hell.

Sanctuary

The rules maintain a happy, productive and satisfying life, for the majority.

The Keepers enforce the rules. This is the way of the law inside the habitat.

The following story is now the prologue for the novel: Habitat.

He sat rigid, fixated on his hands with their palms down and fingers spread on the table. Rhol Sud had no experience of this side of the law. Interaction with Keepers had only ever been amicable. He had always regarded them as the friendly front line of a caring administration. This arrest, this unfounded accusation, had him floundering in shock. When he read out the warrant the Grey Coat had been courteous, as all Keepers were. No one he knew had ever been issued with the mildest sanction so he tried calming himself. Obviously, there'd been a mistake. He had accompanied the Keeper to the custodial suites willingly, expecting to explain... Explain what? He couldn't understand the rule he was accused of infringing so what did he think he would be able to explain? Renewed efforts to still his mind had some effect. He trusted the Keepers and he was innocent. Soon he would be on the long trek home, mocking his own foolish apprehension no doubt.

He'd lost track of time and judged it now by tiredness and aching muscles. Held fast to the chair as he was, Rhol yearned for the freedom and security of his home. It was a half-day walk from Rhol's farm to the custody suites. He hadn't known that until the Keeper told him. During that interminable walk Rhol had tried asking questions but the Keeper would not be engaged in conversation. The farmer was obliged to maintain the sedate pace set by the Keeper who felt no need to flout the rule on walking speed. He took heart from that memory. Surely if that Grey Coat had believed there was any truth in the warrant he would have proceeded with greater haste.

His eyes shifted the short distance to other hands on the table, and the jacket at their wrists. It was made of the same grey fabric as the Grey Coat's and sporting two narrow blue stripes at the end of each sleeve. It seemed an age since the Grey Coat had handed him over to the Blue Coats. That was when fear began to clutch at his chest but not yet so deep inside that he felt unable to make his case.

The face across the table, the face he was now unable to lift his eyes to, was the face of the Blue Coat who had taken charge of him at the reception area. There had been a brief conversation between the Grey Coat who brought him here and this Keeper who had other Blue Coats bring him to this interview room, this chair and this table.

Rhol's eyes turned slowly back to his spread fingers and the little hoops that held them to the table. For each digit there was a restraint between the first and second knuckles and another above the large

knuckle except for the thumb with one band above the only joint there. He'd used those hands for all but five years of the fifty-one years of his life. Farmers' children began helping out with chores in their sixth year and from that time on scrapes and knocks left life-long signs.

Rhol studied the sore knuckle of the index finger of his left hand. Only lately had he laughed, as his family did at the time of the injury, for having been so inept at his age as to hit it with a hammer, missing the nail the blow was intended for. The plastic half-circles either side of that knuckle were on tiny hinges. Rhol relived the confusion when he had offered no resistance to the two Blue Coats who had pushed him into the chair, pulled his hands to the table and manacled them there. First the wide bands for his wrists were turned on their hinges and the tab screwed down, then this finger and one by one, each of the others. He'd tried to ask why but their only response was that Keeper Huxley would be conducting this interrogation.

His pulse rate surged alarmingly as the blue-trimmed sleeve moved towards him, pushing the illegal flyer between his hands and under his eyes. He heard the machine he'd only half noticed on entering the room, beep rapidly in unison with his increased cardio-vascular activity, understanding now the purpose of the strap around his chest. The reflex to pull back was immediately curtailed by restraints holding him to the chair at seven points.

Keeper Huxley was in no hurry. 'You requisitioned ten sheets of this quality of paper three hundred and seventy-two days ago.'

Rhol's mind spun back a year. He had little use for paper. Mostly he used it to educate his son in farming techniques and then let the boy draw on it until it was so shredded it was useful only for bulking out compost.

He stared at the paper in bafflement. 'Yes.'

'The writing is not in the ink of the calligraphers or any art material utilised in Bohemia. It has not been produced by an engineer's graphite pencil or by the plastic crayon used by a child. What is that paint, Mr. Sud?'

He recognised it, sure enough, as the words swam and the nature of the case against him began to make horrible sense.

He swallowed. 'Clay.'

'Speak up please.'

'It looks like the clay we use for slip but I swear this is nothing to do with me. Gardeners use slip...'

'We'll come to that. Which hand do you write with?'

'My right.'

When Keeper Huxley stood with relaxed ease, casually picking up the hammer, Rhol's eyes at last followed upward motion but only as far as the blue lapels on the jacket of the grey uniform. His mouth widened in disbelief as without warning the instrument slammed into the small knuckle of his smallest finger.

'You were denounced,' Keeper Huxley informed him quietly.

His hands grazed and bruised on the manacles as they strained for the need to cradle the fractured joint while the sight of crushed, bloody flesh

driven off the bone receded into the darkness of pure shock. 'But I didn't...'

The hammer fell on the second knuckle of his little finger causing him to cry out in pain and disbelief.

'You're not here for a confession, Mr. Sud.'

Gruelling labour had resulted in severe and unexpected damage during the course of his work but he'd never once in all of his life experienced an attack on his body by another person. This blow had detached shards of bone. They sailed in a pool of pulp and blood. The sight of it, along with the pain swirled in the turmoil of his mind, 'But I had nothing to do...'

The hammer smashed down grinding into the smaller knuckle of his ring finger and he cried out his denial of any knowledge concerning the appalling, defamatory pink clay words on the leaflet.

A dispassionate voice told him, 'This is not a trial. This is an investigation. The level of your cooperation will dictate the severity of your sentence.'

'I've never seen, I swear, I can't tell you what I don't know, I always keep the rules, I've never...'

When the hammer crunched into the large knuckle of the ring finger Rhol's mouth twisted in pain and anguish. There seemed nothing he could say to halt this unfair assault but desperation made a beggar of him all the same.

'I don't understand. Please stop and let me...'

Trembling now, Rhol wrestled growing awareness of physical distress with incredulity in a desperate search for respite. There must be something he could say to make the Keeper understand the absurdity of these accusations. Almost anyone could have requested that type of paper when he did. In any case he'd had only ten sheets. That wasn't even being questioned. Surely the people behind this had made more than ten leaflets. And the clay slip: anyone could have taken a pot of slip out of a hundred possible sheds. It was blatantly ludicrous...

The hammer landed on the large knuckle of his middle finger shattering the bone, dislodging flesh and gristle and sending blood upwards to splatter the table.

'This interrogation will be over when you give me the names of your accomplices.'

The farmer's dry mouth worked to find words but only incoherent moaning and keening emerged from it.

'This is not the only method of questioning available to me, Mr. Sud. This you surely do understand. We cannot allow you and your associates to incite mass suicide. In comparison you can comprehend, no doubt, that broken fingers would be insufficient recompense. We want only to terminate the activities of an illegal cell bent on harming law-abiding citizens. Give me one name and you will be allowed to go home on a conditional discharge.'

Air raked in and out of the farmer's lungs as he struggled to find an acceptable response, realising at last there was little time to waste between the hammer strikes. But the seconds disappeared in a fog of

panic as the hammer was driven down on to the small knuckle of his index finger, causing him to jerk violently against all restraints, adding to his suffering. Pathetic wailing seeped along with bubbles of spittle through his twisted lips.

'You seem remarkably slow even for a farmer, Mr. Sud. I'm willing to accept you may have been talked into plotting with these terrorists by a person with a sharper mind. Give me the name of that person.'

Rhol searched his simple mind for a name he could give. Certainly, there'd been gossip amongst the farmers, of possible dissidents. Usually, they centred around gardeners who seemed to be ridiculously arrogant for the no greater talent required in their work. Sometimes the animosity rumbled viciously beneath the surface of the seemingly smooth and soothing life under the Rules. He was considering that maybe it was a gardener who had denounced him when heavy metal hammered down on the large knuckle of his index finger making him scream out in agony. His voice was lost to him amid the turbulent pounding of his heart, dribbling and dripping perspiration.

'With your thumb intact, Mr. Sud, you may still manage to grip something less precise than a brush for painting clay letters, in your right hand. Save your thumb and give me a name.'

'The gardeners,' he sobbed. 'It must have been a gardener.'

'Which one?'

'I can't know who. How could I...'

The realisation of the imminent destruction of his thumb was expressed in howling denials from the depths of his disbelieving soul. Shaking from head to toe and with frightening palpitations Rhol fought to find a trail through his chaotic head that could lead him to the explanation which would save him from an even more horrific ordeal.

Keeper Huxley moved calmly round the table. 'With one hand you will manage much of your work. You won't need a great deal of help with your personal hygiene while your left hand is whole. How well will you cope without either hand, Mr. Sud?'

'Walter Knox. I think it's possible Walter Knox has something to do with...'

'Thank you, Mr. Sud. Your discharge will be downloaded to a hand device. Collect it on the way out. Be sure to abide by the conditions therein.'

Rhol again studied the words on the illegal, rough paper that had been thrust across the table prior to the onslaught of this torture and that had brought him to this terrible place. Shocked by the pain and desperation of sending another innocent man to this fate, Rhol Sud read the large, pink clay-painted words on the flyer with its criminal message, and that he had been falsely accused of writing: YOU DON'T NEED TO BE IN HERE.

Life Class

Cornelius

It was only supposed to be an experiment. Just three clients paying a very high fee, for a life-changing experience. Well, in a very short time I had no thoughts of 'value for money', 'will the cheques bounce?' or 'could I charge even more?'

Sandy

I had known Cornelius for some time. I admired his work and had visited his gallery in his fabulous country house on two previous occasions. When he announced his intention to provide luxury weekends there, with life-drawing classes taught by himself, I was delighted to sign up. In spite of amassing large quantities of money, I rarely found an opportunity to meet new people. It will surprise no one to learn that worldwide there are a limited number of wealthy socialites and frankly, I dislike that kind of company. Here was an opportunity to meet people I would not come across in any other field.

Eugenie

Bloody parents! Sent me to that awful bloody hole in the middle of nowhere, for bloody art lessons. The first person I met was a total bloody nutcase. A ridiculous bloody old woman called Sandy. She talked and bloody talked. Talked at me. In the first minute it was bloody obvious she'd be lecturing me at every opportunity, if I let on the reason my parents had picked out this particular bloody punishment for me.

William

I have no idea what possessed me to sign up for Cornelius Garland's 'unique get-away weekend'. The divorce hit me hard and even though Laoni gained a great deal of my wealth, I still had more money than I could keep tabs on. The divorce also opened my eyes to the treadmill I had been on. I felt to be crashing from that as much as the pain of Laoni's greedy betrayal.

Diana

I'd modelled for all Cornelius' nude portraits over the past eight years. I was only sixteen when my mother brought me to the 'manor' to earn a few pounds helping her and the others with the gardening, when he saw me and fell into raptures.

At that age I thought it was hilarious, and even more so when he offered me £50 an hour to sit for him.

He didn't mention nude that time. But I was well aware of how grooming works.

Mum said, 'Take the money and don't do anything you don't want to.' I planned to do that anyway but it was good to have her approval.

Cornelius was funny. He didn't mean to be. Eccentric, mum called it.

At first he'd say things like, 'You are far more than beautiful,' very dramatically. I think he liked that I never giggled over the compliments. Or when he said, a year in, 'I worship you, Diana.' He sang it really. 'I worship you and need,' last word stressed, 'neeed to paint aaalll of you.'

I knew what that meant. We had gone from me sitting in an armchair in jumper and jeans, to tee shirt and jeans, to tee shirt and shorts on a stool and then to reclining in a bikini. I had been ready for the next step.

I was ready for the request after that too. It never came. He never touched me, except to arrange my hair or move an arm a little. And always with care and a smile. I could have loved him in a way, if he wasn't old.

When I told mum that she laughed, 'He's my age!' Mum was thirty-seven. She added thoughtfully, 'He had a crush on me when we were in school.' 'Gross!'

She laughed harder, 'If I had known he could make so much money from daubing, I'd have encouraged him.'

But it didn't occur to her: Cornelius wasn't quite right in the head. He came back for her and saw me looking exactly like her the last time he saw her. When he became obsessed. She was a bit simple but I loved her! And I miss her! I keep telling myself she probably didn't feel any pain. Probably suffocated. Probably didn't even wake up. An advantage of her habitual evening of drinking a bottle of wine. On her own.

Eugenie

I didn't talk to anyone on the first day. Bloody Sandy talked at me of course: something about having business dealings with my father. A fine man, apparently. How the hell would I know? He was never home. When he was he didn't talk to me. Except that last time I saw him.

Mum had wound him up, before he called me into his poxy study. 'Mummy has been telling me about your recent behaviour.'

I felt my lips twisting as my mind put a hundred apt retorts on my tongue. 'I'm very disappointed.'

'I won't do it anymore,' usually shut him up.

'I've heard that too many times!'

Shit! He might stop my allowance again and I'd only stashed a hundred in cash.

'But,' he held up a placating hand, giving me hope, the bastard. 'But, she has persuaded me that punishment doesn't work.'

Oh! Got it at last! I said, 'It does make me feel a little bitter Daddy.'

He grimaced, And I got that he wouldn't fall for the '*terribly sorry*' anymore. 'She thinks if you have something positive,' he thought a moment, clearly not believing in her latest idea to '*help*' me, 'something self-affirming, so that you won't have a vacuum in your life that you need to fill with her...'

He only just stopped short of the usual insult.

'OK daddy. Thank you.'

He was not fooled. 'School tells us you have a remarkable talent for art.'

My hopes soared, along with a picture of the Mediterranean and a handsome Italian tutor. A young man. Not a bloody old prick and the English bloody countryside, with a load of other old prats. And not a joint or bottle in sight! No boys. Bloody hell! Exactly how creative was I supposed to be under those constraints?

Cornelius

Young Eugenie was the biggest problem in my latest venture. My cook found her in the larder, before she'd even unpacked her lacy pink suitcase, drinking the sherry she kept for cooking.

Sandy was boring, talentless and non-stop empty chatter. But she paid in advance and I was under pressure to settle some bills. So tiresome, as well as draining of creativity.

William had no interest in art. I swear he was spending liquid assets on anything he could think of since his fancy young wife had shown her true colours and purpose.

Diana held my heart in her hands, as always. I had even sold silver to keep up with her meagre fees. Darling little innocent, she trusted me completely. Anyone could tell by the way she looked at me, that she worshipped me. It was humbling to find that such a simple soul could so plainly appreciate my work.

William

I had come across Eugenie's father at race meetings. He regularly, happily lost huge bets. For that reason, her personality and moral standards were no surprise to me.

I found Eugenie in my room one evening. She must have searched everywhere to find the half bottle of Scotch I had forgotten was in my suitcase. I suspect I was more concerned over that than her father would have been.

Diana, I could tell by her face, especially when Cornelius passed another 'deep' observation, was both wise and straightforward.

I think only Sandy had some comprehension of the extent of the disaster, on that fateful morning. Like me, she tried using her mobile phone. Neither of us got answers from anywhere in the world.

Cornelius was the least likely to be affected by shocking events. He lived in a fantasy world.

Diana

It was hard to watch Sandy quiet, not that I stopped for long to watch. She'd realised something when I was only just beginning to fear what could have happened.

I felt so sorry for Eugenie. She was just a teenager and clearly not there at her own request. Poor thing. When I began panicking about my mother and William was saying something about 'at least Laoni will be safe' and Cornelius became extra protective of me, Eugenie said, 'I hope it spread to Coventry.'

Sandy asked her why.

'That's where my parents live.'

Only William seemed to see the sadness in that. Cornelius had spaced out and Sandy was working on taking charge.

Sandy

As we were introduced on the first day of our artistic break, I noted each of my new friends' particular situations: William's broken heart was written all over his face, from the moment we were introduced. Oppositional Eugenie proved a reminder of why I had chosen to never have children, Cornelius, a genius and Diana very intelligent, and lovely to draw. All were a pleasure to know for the short time we had together.

Our first sign that something could be wrong, was when we came down to no breakfast. Eugenie was expertly raiding the larder with William quietly cautioning her, when Cornelius and I went to the kitchen to investigate the lack of activity in the dining room.

Diana, who was staying over as part of the 'weekends immersion' found us there only minutes later. No staff had turned up. I secretly offered Cornelius a loan, to pay them. Neither of us could think why all were absent when he told me they were paid up to date.

Cornelius

I intended to give the cook a good rollicking but when I tried the house phone it was silent. As I searched for my mobile, Sandy quietly handed me hers. Kind but not much use without 'cook' labelled in speed dial.

Anyway, long story short, we had no phone signals, no radio and no TV. Zero communications. A thought rolled through my mind repeatedly, 'Can't be cut off. Not by all of them.' Phone and TV perhaps, but I'd kept up with electricity if nothing else. Because no one else's mobile picked up a signal, we all suspected something more concerning.

Diana

Cornelius is panicking. I'm suggesting we walk down to mine. Mum's house is half a mile this side of the village; almost a mile walk but surely Cornelius can sell it as something to do with an 'artist's authentic experience'. She'll cook. I know she will. That will keep the customers happy until we find out what's going on.

William

Sandy believes the story. Eugenie wasn't listening except to the part about walking, to which she is now reacting by swearing. Diana is persuading Cornelius to trust her. I certainly will go willingly. Something is wrong and we're not going to find out what, by staying here.

Diana

I've dug out trainers to fit Eugenie. She's chucking them around because she'll have to wear them with a miniskirt. I don't reckon she'll come with

us. Sandy's shoes are near enough flat. William's mumbling about how he'd have packed walking boots if he'd known. Because Eugenie has got my good trainers on, I'm wearing my mum's gardening shoes that she leaves here. Cornelius, in his own home, has only ridiculous tight snakeskin slip-ons.

Sandy

Diana has been saying 'soon be there' for at least fifteen minutes. Cornelius, poor darling is in agony. He's given up pointing out 'moments to treasure'.

Eugenie

I caught up with them easily. Slow old farts. And I'm not taking the stupid bloody sketch pad Diana's trying to stuff me with. Breakfast with her bog common '*mum!*' '*Rustic!*' Bloody Cornelius. Bloody parents. What the hell?

William

No one knew they were there. Little sods. We've been in this woodland for five minutes and not heard so much as a twig snap. I suppose their presence could have been masked by the noise of Eugenie's constant moaning and Diana's chattering efforts to reassure us all. She's worried now, about bringing four 'posh' strangers to her mother's humble home with the promise of feeding us all.

I had been puzzling over seeing no wild animals until we came across a dead squirrel. Sandy spotted it in the undergrowth when my mind was drifting.

Now, suddenly angry, I snap out of the shock and punch the nearest little lout. Another is fishing through Cornelius' pockets as I watch my victim, a teenaged boy, slumping to the ground.

A slap across the head from Sandy, another punch from me and another from Diana, has one of them dragging my victim to his feet, and the three of them running. Whooping for goodness sake, into the woods. Diana is urging us to go after them as I see the knife in Cornelius' chest. He's flat on his back. I check anyway but already know he's dead.

'Diana!'

'What?'

'Leave them.'

'No way!'

'We need to get to your mother's house and call the police.'

'Yes, after I've...'

'Cornelius is...'

'What?'

Only now does she see Sandy slumped by his body, crying, and Eugenie clamping a hand over her mouth.

Diana

I'm sticking close to William, showing him the path to mum's house and hoping he can protect me if the kids come back. I recognised them. They are always hanging around together. Mum's new young helper in the gardens, told me about them. They often slept in the house of one of their dads, near the woods. 'No parental control,' mum said. She's great! I remember being angry with her when I was their age because she wouldn't let me do anything vaguely dodgy, but she's smart about things like that and she trusted me with Cornelius. I can't feel sorry for little murderers though, especially as I'm scared shitless they'll come back.

William

Diana is terrified. She doesn't know she's grasping my arm. Sandy is forcing herself to follow my urging to keep moving, crying and sobbing loudly but dragging Eugenie nevertheless. If those little sods want to come back, they'll have no difficulty finding us.

Ah, a heavy stick. Perfect for a club. As I pick it up, Diana finds one of her own.

'Nearly there,' she whispers.

I would laugh were I not preparing to cave in the head of a murderous teenager.

Eugenie

Bloody hell! What a sad little hovel. I hope she can at least cook. And if this cow pulls me again, I'm going to hit her harder.

Sandy

I don't know how I've done it, but in spite of losing poor Cornelius and even in spite of the spoilt little brat slapping at my hand and shoulder, I've managed to bring her here. It's a tiny little house but a cup of tea will perhaps help. We can describe the vicious louts to the police. Oh god! Poor Cornelius!

Diana

Getting worried about mum now. Can't see any sign of her up and about at the time she's usually preparing food for the pets. I hope those bloody little gits haven't...

Eugenie is peering out the kitchen window by the back door as I unlock it.

What the hell's wrong? I stop dead at the door with William running into my back.

'Something wrong?'

'She's not even up.'

He gets it immediately.

Sandy sinks into a chair at the table crying and not getting it. Eugenie meanders, moaning, and not getting it.

William says, 'Shall I check the other rooms?'

He thinks he's going to find... Oh God. 'N... no. Just come with me.'

'Oh shit.'

My first thought is the front room, the obvious place they'd look for things to rob. William is holding me steady when I stagger with sheer relief. Nothing has been touched.

With nothing else down here, I lead the way up mum's narrow stairs, heading for her bedroom, scared now that she's ill.

I can't believe it! She's curled up in bed! She's never in bed at this time. I try to rush over to her but William holds me still.

'Let me check first.'

'It's OK. She'll be scared if she's ill and you...'

He's at the bed with me, holding my free arm as I gently shake my mum's shoulder.

'Oh God!' This is not possible! 'Oh God!' I can hear my screaming as though it's someone else.

William

I have to reach around Diana's trembling form to check her mother's pulse. There isn't one.

Diana has slipped out of my grip and is ripping the quilt off her mother, looking for a knife, I guess. There isn't one. Not a wound of any kind.

As Sandy pulls her away, hugging her and crying fiercely with her, I note that the victim appears peaceful. Not believing she can be dead, I check again. I cannot begin to think how she has died. Could a heart attack or stroke leave someone like this?

Back downstairs, I realise that Eugenie is not here. She must have heard the screaming and wailing. I'm concerned. There being nothing I can do for Diana or Sandy, I go in search of Eugenie.

I'm beginning to think about making the police demand her parents send for her because I can't see either of them willingly coming to collect her, when I find her in the small back garden. To begin with I can see only her rigid back. Now I look beyond that, to the scene that has finally silenced her.

Eugenie

I can feel William drawing up by my side. I know it's him by his aftershave. I'm staring at an aviary of dead birds and cages of dead rabbits.

'Diana's mother breeds them,' I explain as I recall a conversation Diana once tried to drag me into.

'I know.' his hushed voice tells me that he too is shocked.

'Why would she kill them?' I think she must be a maniac.

William says, 'She didn't.'

'What? You think the boys...'

'No.'

'What? What the hell? Who then?'

Sandy

William has decided we should start walking, until we find a way of contacting the police.

Why? Why is she pushing me away? I have no one. Nothing. I thought I might spend time with dear Cornelius. I hadn't thought in what capacity. I have money. He only wanted him his art. I'd have worked something out.

Now she's pushing me away. I could have found a place. A place to belong. To be of use. To be needed. Wanted even.

I can't stay here. I have some idea of going back to Cornelius' house. Or to his body. Or, somewhere.

I feel a panic attack coming on. All my money and I've never found a treatment that works. I can see a big house. It's closer to the village. There'll be safety in there. A phone. Get police. Oh God, I can't see. Must get there.

Diana

Poor, poor mum. Oh no. Oh no! I'm shuffling across to look at the countryside she loved. She'd spend ages relaxing with the scene from this, her bedroom window. But something's wrong. Sandy? What the hell?

She's staggering towards the Bradley's house. Their dog will be out. I have to get William to stop her. Stupid woman. All that money and thick as a brick.

I'm trying to focus. I can probably get William and even stupid Eugenie to help me stop Sandy. I think I can feel my sense of reality slipping away.

Now setting out after Sandy, Eugenie is pulling at me, garbling something about all my pets being dead.

I rip my arm out of her hands, 'Don't be stupid! She breeds them to sell. She takes care of them, you stupid little cow!'

She just slapped me! I hit her back.

William is pulling us apart.

'Pack it in! Look!'

I can't. I'm busy.

'Look!' He pushes my head in the right direction.

Eugenie is saying, 'What the hell?'

Is that their dog? The Bradley's Alsatian? Just behind their steel gates? I used to laugh at them. Is it dead? What the hell?

'What the hell's going on?' I can only just hear my own whispered voice.

William

Where the hell does Sandy think she's going? Straight through the side gate. Veering clear of the dog's body.

This feels ominous. I have to leave the girls to chase after Sandy. I have no idea what danger we're in.

I tried Diana's mother's mobile. There was no signal. Perhaps that isn't unusual. But now I see more than dead pets in a back garden, and another one here; not forgetting the squirrel. I can see the corpses of wild

animals as I chase after Sandy. I'm slowing to take in the fact. Pigeons. They look like they've fallen out of the trees. Now I spot other birds in the grass and borders this side of the hedge; they seem to have fallen out of the sky. They're all dead.

I can hear splashing and screaming when I dash to the back of the house.

Diana

'We have to stop her!' I yelled. William didn't know the danger Sandy could run straight into. Thank goodness he chased after her, to the back of the house on the other side of the hedge.

Now we hear violent splashing, garbled pleading, mixed with panicked screams as I run to tell William, 'She's fallen in the pool.' I screech to a halt at the gate, as he plunges into the pool.

Sandy

Have to get away. A gate in a tall hedge! I can hide. Oh no! I'm falling. Can't breathe. Drowning. Help. Help me... hel.. hel... me

Diana

Sandy is floating. Face down. William's heavy clothes are making it hard for him to get to the edge. Eugenie barrels into my back but I'm strong enough to stop her pushing me into the pool. I know this place. What idiot builds a tall wall with a gate inches away from a diving pool? Answer: an idiot like Francis Bradley.

Eugenie

My head hurts from screaming. Sandy! Stupid bitch!

I walk carefully around the narrow edge of the pool to the patio end and watch William double checking the body he heaved out of it. Of course she's dead! Bloody hell! Stupid bitch!

I turn to the house, thinking someone has to call the police. But what? What the hell? Inside, peering through the French windows I... What the hell?

Diana

Eugenie's seen something in the pool room. I'll check her out and leave William to take care of himself. Bloody hell! What the hell's going on? They look dead! I recognise Francis Bradley, his wife and the two couples they have their 'parties' with. Some said they'd burn in hell for that. Bloody hell! Is that it? Judgement day? They're all dead.

William

Is there a poison in the air? Did it kill Sandy as well as those in the house? No. The three of us would be dying by now. But there is, or was, something widespread in the area.

I am ushering the girls back out down the ridiculously narrow side path, fearful of their staggering by the deep pool, and back out of the gate.

I don't want them to try clambering over the barbed wire next to the house, like I did when trying to save Sandy's life.

'The village,' Diana breathes shakily. 'We'll get help.'

Probably, I'm thinking. Should I have broken into that house and used their phone? No, they might only have mobiles and I know that at the very least those are down. Diana's right. We are traumatised and need help.

She is picking up her pace now that we are close to the houses. I am having to pull Eugenie to make her keep up the pace. We draw abreast of Diana when she stops dead. What has she seen now?

'Oh God!' Eugenie collapses to her knees. 'What the hell? What? What's happening?'

I follow her eyes. There are strange people in the street. In some kind of costume: red one-piece tight body suits, golden skin has been given a sheen, bald heads. A film set? Horror film?

They are carrying bodies to a flatback 'hovering' truck, and throwing them on. I can see more emerging from the houses along the street, loading up 'bodies'. I'm preparing to pull Eugenie back from where the cameras could be. I look out for a director. Someone in charge. But surely, this has to be connected with Diana's mother and the people in the pool room. None of it makes sense.

Diana

Eugenie's losing it. Shaping up to scream again. How can I stop her getting attention from these weirdos? I try pulling her away, to the side of the house or just behind a hedge. Even with my hand on her mouth she's making a noise. They won't miss anything in the silence, so I shove her towards them and get behind the hedge myself. William staggers. He's shocked and trying to choose between risking himself to save her and waiting to see what will happen to her, I guess. As one of them turns to her groaning and halting movements, William dodges to the cover of a bush.

I clamp a hand over my mouth to keep in the horror of treading on a dead cat. Luckily, I suppose, because that helps me keep the sound in when Eugenie is zapped with something like a taser with no wires. Like sci-fi.

William scrunches down as they take her body to chuck it on the pile on their truck.

I can't breathe. I can't see. I can't, can't...

William

They want some of us alive. One of them struck us with the same weapon that killed Eugenie but Diana is OK. She's whispering to me, as the paralysis wears off, that just like me she feared she'd been killed. We think we've entered the afterlife for a moment until we realise we're not going to be dumped on the back of one of those awful body collecting vehicles along with Eugenie.

We are watching a weird amber coloured wall ‘growing’ around the main part of the village. We can make no sense of that until we are forced to follow a new group of people and pass through a gap that morphs open in the wall.

Inside the enclosure, I have to stop Diana touching the wall. I don’t know how she thinks she’ll climb a smooth structure such as this. We’ll not be able to get over that by any means I can think of. They would not put us in here if that were an option. Naturally, I test it. When I throw a stone against it, it fizzles and skips on the ground where it falls and burns red.

‘Bloody hell!’

If that had been Diana’s hand, it could have met the same fate as that stone.

Now we’re at the edge of a loud group, listening to a rabble rouser. He thinks that next time the gap morphs open in the wall we can all rush out, attack the ‘aliens’, grab their weapons and turn the tables.

Diana and I exchange agreement through discreet meeting of eyes. We slip away and settle into the house that once belonged to a homely little family. We’re safe. For now.

Ivors Wife

Ivors Wife (no not a mistake in punctuation) is a ‘spin-off’ from The Smile. This tale is not for the faint-hearted. It is about misogyny and as such a certain type of narrative is necessary to get the point across. Nothing in this story could be described as gratuitous.

My sister Win invariably wore an expression suggesting she'd been forced to drink the contents of an unflushed toilet bowl. It was, therefore, no great surprise to hear that following her three-year tour of duty in the police, she chose to join them for her fulltime career. Thus, at twenty-three she opted to probably never leave the City while I, at only nineteen, was planning my third visit to the Fort farms with Papa. Win had never even been in a plane, yet she believed she knew more about the Forts than I did.

She came to my room on a mission to press home her point. 'You could at least look at the leaflet, Rona.'

I hardly needed to glance at what she held, but I did. It was, as expected, anti-slavery rhetoric. An accusation propagated by a small action group of what I then regarded as a bunch of attention-seekers jumping on a bandwagon of angst-ridden young adults aiming at a life in political government. An organisation she hadn't noticed, never so much as accused the farmers of breaking the law.

I'd been to the Forts. Win's friends hadn't. They'd conjured up from thin air and ancient stories, pictures of half the population in any given farm Fort, being enslaved to the other.

'Rona! Read it!'

'I've seen it before, Win. It's rubbish.'

'These people need our help.'

'No, they don't! Grow up, Win!'

'They have a vested interest in being civil to City traders.'

'And we have a vested interest in trading with them! That's why we're never hungry! You need to stop mixing with those nutcases, Win!'

'Rona, they're dangerous! You are in danger there. Father won't be able to...'

'Win!' I ripped the leaflet from her hand, to wave it in her face. 'This is the real problem! This stupid organisation could cause the farmers to put sanctions on us. It insults them! If some women in the Forts feel to be "suffering", I made the quotes in the air, 'they need to stop complaining and stand up for themselves. What they don't need is soft City women supporting their self-pity.'

I'd forgotten my sister's nonsense by the time I reached the airport. Papa's people had his goods loaded on the plane before we got there. I'd never given a second's thought to that process.

It aggravated me to hear him go through the usual spiel. 'One day I'd like you to see our business through from start to finish.'

I said, 'I know Papa.'

'You'll need to recognise when the farmers' needs change. To predict or even direct what goods they'll want.'

'Yes Papa.' We were climbing the steps into the plane.

'Because you can't...'

'Take more merchandise than absolutely necessary. It's too expensive.'

'Excellent. With some practical experience under your belt, you'll be ready to move this business to the next level.'

I was halfway to my seat but though I stiffened I didn't falter. No way did I want to run his boring business.

As always, the plane ride was exciting for the first hour over the endless expanses of desert. After the meal I settled down to sleep until Papa woke me for my favourite view of the farmland. We were low enough to see the farmers on their motorbikes travelling along the dusty tracks between the rich fields of crops and grazing livestock.

That was what I wanted. It was what I'd wanted since my first visit here in my early teens. How often I'd dreamed of selling my shares in the factory and buying land attached to a farm Fort.

Eventually, the plane descended vertically in an area of sand a little distance from Erin's Fort. My heart fluttered alarmingly when I saw that it was Ivor who approached in the car to take us and the goods, to the Fort gates.

He was gorgeous. Or fabulous. Incredible. Powerful and cool. Not like City men at all. The vain ones who developed muscles in their gyms were poor specimens when compared to Ivor's physique. To say nothing of his looks. Tall, dark and handsome, like in the romantic novels I devoured by the score. And more! Broad and powerful. Oozing sex appeal.

I was lost in erotic dreams when Papa hissed in my ear, 'Rona! You look like a bitch on heat!'

Ivor's knowing, glowing eyes met mine briefly, before he continued his conversation with Papa.

'We can't increase our yields, but we could cope with a less varied diet ourselves. That would be a very big sacrifice on our part.'

Papa responded testily, as much for embarrassment I was causing as for the hard bargaining. 'I can let Erin have one more computer.'

'And an extra power cell.'

'I'd have no profit left!'

Ivor seemed to be losing interest. Until he glanced back at me in such a way that had my heart pounding. 'Alright. Just the extra computer.'

Something had happened between Ivor and me. And it was not only in my imagination. Normally he didn't notice I existed. This time he all but gave me a promise. While they went to the refreshing cold of the butchery to supervise the loading of meat into his refrigerated containers, I worked through mental images of the fruition of that promise.

On the flight back I sensed less irritation from Papa, over the lack of attention I gave to his plans for my future.

I did not sleep. I dared not. I knew my dreams of Ivor would be more intense than ever. I feared acting out a physical reaction to that imagery.

And once home I was far too shiny to relax over the good meal Win had ready for us. As soon as Papa went outside to smoke his cigar, I confided my deepest, dominating feelings to my sister.

'You what!'

'I'm in love.'

Apparently old coals needed raking over. 'Who with?'

'His name is Ivor.'

'A farmer!'

'This isn't a teenage fancy.'

'What!'

'I've met him many times, but this is the first time he's shown that he likes me.'

'As a slave!' The tone told me I was in enormous trouble and a total idiot. It also told me how far her suspicious mind could take her.

'You just don't want me to be happy!'

'I'm trying to protect you!'

'You're a dried-up old woman. A twenty-three-year-old, cold, old spinster. You're not...'

'There are good men in the City! He won't come here you know...'

'Papa will talk to him...'

'Father has no idea...'

'In your head, no one knows anything except your crazy friends in that ludicrous political group, Win! How can you be so stupid!'

'Please, Rona...'

I walked away, slamming the door on her, as well as the clearing up from dinner.

I didn't bother going with Papa again, until he was heading for Erin's Fort rather than some obscure farm I no longer cared about.

In between his travels, while Papa was home, I'd been working on a method to get agreement from him to let me stay with Ivor, until his next trip to Erin's Fort. Obviously, I could have simply told my father of my plans for the future but I loved him. I didn't want him worrying about me and if he listened to Win he'd be afraid for my safety as well as doubting my ability to learn how to farm.

He was primed and ready by the time we were in that plane, heading for heaven.

I could hardly contain myself when I saw Ivor and as if that wasn't fabulous enough he took matters into his own hands.

'Yan,' he stepped closer to Papa, speaking quietly. Privately.

As they talked, Ivor couldn't take his eyes off me. From time to time Papa glanced across to me with affection. It was an expression that took on a sorrowful tone as their conversation progressed.

At last, he called me to join them. 'You have to think very carefully. Take your time before answering.'

Ivor addressed my father with words I genuinely hadn't begun to imagine, 'I formally request your permission to marry your daughter.'

I gasped. Marriage! 'Yes! Oh yes! I want that more than anything!' Ivor seemed to wince. I put my interpretation down to fear of losing the thing I wanted far too desperately and then realised it was because he didn't want me to be losing my family. I'd see them so rarely once I lived out here. I can't pretend I had no fear of it but that was far outweighed by my desire to spend my life with this man. He was also concerned enough for my feelings to seek Papa's approval.

Already I pictured Win envying my wedding and eating her words. It took an age, but finally Papa agreed. I jumped up and down, clapping my hands. I expected Ivor to kiss me, possibly only on the cheek, but that first touch would stay with me until we returned for the wedding.

He had too much self-respect to make a public display of his emotions. Or, if he felt like I did, he feared he'd not be able to stop at kissing. In fact, he couldn't even look at me but instead led the way to the refrigeration unit to let Papa witness the loading of the best of Erin's fresh meat.

On the way home Papa tried to tell me the culture of the Fort could be different from anything I'd known and I should be prepared to adapt.

Obviously, Win was awful about it. I knew she'd want to spoil the best day of my life. Thus, I did not take my sister when shopping for my wedding gown. I couldn't help showing it to her when I got home though.

It was beautiful, beaded chiffon, emerald green with scarlet tights showing through from the ankles to the waist. The bodice was tight, thin-strapped and low cut. It was the sexiest thing I'd ever owned, set off with sapphire shoes and netted headdress.

Win was outraged, 'They'll kill you for even owning that!'

I was not surprised. Nor was I angry. Sorry for her jealousy, I packed the dress away and fell into my dreams.

'Rona. You have to listen to me. It is not safe for you to go there.'

'Whatever.'

'Rona, this is not close to what you think!'

'Jealousy is a terrible condition.'

'Farmers don't do romance, Rona!'

'This is true love. Not a fling.'

'He's not in love with you!'

'Shut up!'

'I don't know what they're up to but there'll be no happy ever after.'

'Get out.'

'Rona, please listen to me.'

I had to push her out.

She shouted through the door, 'Why won't they even let father attend your wedding, Rona?'

I went into my bathroom. The running water drowned out most of her noise. Then, lying back in the delicious bubbles, I began dreaming of my wedding night.

OK, I did more than dream. I was nineteen, in the peak of good health and I hadn't had a boyfriend for three months.

The first time I entered Erin's Fort, I saw terraces of tall houses enclosing a central courtyard and that's about all, because Ivor gave me a gentle push towards a woman in a very rough, badly-made dress, cut from a thick, scratchy-looking fabric.

While I was congratulating myself on having a maid and preparing to tell her she must have a good wash she hustled me along. Unsure of my place here, I chose not to object to her manner. Instead, I took note of a wider than average building before passing through the door into it.

Deciding on trying the friendly approach, I called after her, 'My name's Rona. What's yours?'

She waited at the door, turned to me and introduced herself curtly, 'Corins Wife.'

'I see. And your name is?'

She stood back by the door, allowing me to enter. Because of the distinctive nature of the work going on in this large room when she began measuring me I realised she expected to be making my wedding dress. 'That's very kind but I've brought my dress with me.'

That was met with a blank expression and an odd response. 'Corin has told me to make your dress.'

'But I don't need you to.' That seemed ungrateful, so I added, 'I'm sure you'd make a beautiful dress but it really isn't necessary.'

I looked around at the women quietly working away at their sewing. There were smiles but most of the glee I'd have expected in the happy occupation of cutting and sewing wedding gowns, was oddly muted. I noted also that the girls being fitted were very young. There were eight. '*Eight bridesmaids*,' I breathed giddily in spite of their subservient attitude in my presence, as I excitedly anticipated the elaborate celebration Ivor had planned.

It was so quiet you wouldn't believe twenty women were occupied in preparing my wedding. Even more so as everyone I tried to strike up a conversation with virtually blanked me.

I got the message they expected to have little to do with me and set to trying to analyse a different culture. All the women here had names ending in Wife. I took that to be a title of respect like in the City where a married woman is addressed as *Madam*. I concluded that they might not be servants but women of a lower class than Ivor; employed by him. That left me with a probable understanding of their lack of sociability: jealousy. My wedding was almost certainly incredibly extravagant by their standards. Doubtless they'd developed notions of my feeling superior to them.

When, at last, the nine of us were dressed in similar plain white frocks, and I'd given up on my fabulous dress not even knowing where it

had got to, the one I knew only as Corins Wife led the procession out into the square.

Tables were set up in the yard, already laden with delicious looking cold foods. There was a head table. I imagined sitting there at the centre of it, proud, with Ivor by my side, and all the dressmakers and bridesmaids admiring me. Envious of my joy. And of my social dominance, even if only for this one evening.

I had been lined up with the bridesmaids in the front row of three. I took one pace forward, one symbolic step ahead of the others, as was fitting for a bride on her special day.

Only then did some men appear. Far fewer than seemed right. Corins Wife and the other dressmakers remained some way behind us. They were not, as I'd expected, joined by their husbands, fathers and brothers. Instead, one wiser looking older man led nine others of all ages, including Ivor, out of the largest, smartest house. The nine were in the same formation as all of us in the white dresses.

I was in the process of anticipating a fascinating ritual when the leading man turned to the others and declared, 'Here are your brides. Take them.'

Only one hesitated. He looked little older than the eight girls I'd believed were my bridesmaids. There was one, older than my father, who took hold of the girl next to me, pushing her with a hand on the back of her neck, to a nearby house. She was barely into her teens.

I'd begun to fear there was some truth in Win's warnings when Ivor strolled up to me, took my hand firmly, met my eyes with a glint in his and said knowingly, 'Come.'

He took me to his house. We were hardly inside the door before he was lifting my dress. I'd felt vulnerable, out in the yard, in public, with no underwear, but now it seemed wonderfully exciting. Hormones rushed, flesh tingled, thrills and throbbing began...

And then it was over. Up against the door. No words. No satisfaction. No care. The hem of my wedding dress fell back down to my bare feet, he zipped his trousers, and left.

I opened the door a crack, to see who was cheering and why. The square was full of men passing around huge tankards of ale, while the women began silently placing more bottles of wine and hot foods on the tables. Not one of my bridesmaids, oh I choked on the realisation, correcting myself: not one of the other brides was out there.

Then Corins Wife came, pushing the door wider to come inside, 'You're new Ivors Wife...'

'My name is Rona,' my voice emerged in shocked whispers. She met my eyes briefly, in calculation, 'You are now Ivors Wife. You have to change your dress.'

I had no idea what was going on as I stared at the ugly grey garment Corins Wife held out for me.

'Thank you, but I'll put my old clothes back on.'

She shook her head, thrust the badly-woven, scratchy garment into my hands, and left.

I was making plans of where to begin investigating this place when Ivor returned. I said, 'What the hell...' when he pulled up my dress, bent me over the table and penetrated me cruelly first with fingers and then with the organ meant for the job. Meant for the job, yes, but not like that. When I shouted that he was hurting me his hand moved from my breast to my mouth and when he finished he pushed my face down into the table. My legs gave way and my chin bashed off the edge of the wood as I crumpled to my knees.

I don't know how long I knelt there confused, in pain and crying, before the rowdiness from outside began to register again, but it was their glee that brought back my resolve. It came with my own words. The women here should stand up for themselves. They were weak and cowering. They allowed themselves to be used in every way. I'd no longer imagine I was in love with Ivor but no way would I go crawling back to Papa and Win. I'd be a farmer, I decided. In time I'd trade with Papa. And I'd make these women understand their rights. And fight for them.

Having prepared myself for a massive battle on all fronts on the day after my 'wedding' and a night without sleep, I was amazed by the change in Ivor. All the roughness was gone. He spoke to me. Quietly. Kindly. He was also holding his head. Judging by the state he finally arrived home in, I knew he was suffering with a colossal hangover.

'I can tell you about some decisions Erin made last night.'

I was so hungry I hardly heard him. I'd never been so hungry in my life. Early in the morning I'd been out searching for food. There were women in their kitchens at dawn, when the last of the men had only just staggered home. I saw them through the unglazed windows but none would answer me when I spoke to them. They backed away and those I approached waved me away angrily. Already heat from the desert was rising but I could feel even greater heat from inside their kitchens. And I saw young children sitting on the floor, huddled together in the corners of those kitchens. Rooms that looked exactly the same as the one I'd been raped in.

My resolve was reinforced. If there was even a grain of truth in Win's accusations, I would not be another victim here. I recalled that as I watched Ivor nursing his head and demanding attention.

'Did you hear me?'

'Yes, Ivor, I heard you but I'm more concerned about getting something for breakfast.'

His face contorted into instant fury, which he somehow contained. 'Go to the cold store and get my food.'

'I don't know where the cold store is. Do I?'

He stood abruptly, scraping back the chair and pointed through our unglazed window above the sink, 'The green door.'

'I don't have any money.' My stupid voice took on an unwanted tremulous quality. I cleared my throat and met his eyes squarely.

He spaced his words for emphasis, 'Go in, fetch bacon for me and whatever the kuff you need to make some kuffing bread. Slut!'

'Are you expecting me to cook breakfast for you when you talk to me like that!'

Suddenly I was reeling. Pinwheeling towards the sink. My head felt like it was exploding. The pain and shock were too great for me to even think how to react. When he looked like he'd come for me again I scrambled out of the door with a half-formed plan of feeding him and helping to ease the hangover, so that we could talk, sensibly.

Behind the green door I found a huge, well-stocked larder. It could have rivalled any grocery shop in the City. I slowed down in wonder and thought. Make bread?

I recognised flour and had half an idea of how it was done. But otherwise I was stumped. I found bacon of all sorts in refrigerated units and was puzzling over all of this when a young girl entered.

She was about fifteen, cut, bruised and miserable. I would rather have offered her help than ask for it but if I was ever going to be any use to her, or her to me, I'd need first to befriend her. I gave my name as Rona.

She responded hollowly, 'Zakes Wife.'

I blurted out my problem, 'I can't make bread.'

That awoke her to gawping. 'Didn't your mother teach you?'

'No.'

'Alright, have some of mine for now. Come back this afternoon and I'll show you.'

'Wow. Is that OK?'

She huffed. 'He'll need his food. You need to get to it. Now.'

With that she fished a loaf of bread from her basket, cut it in half and then fetched the bacon she was in there for.'

Once breakfast was served up, Ivor calmed a little. Until I sat on the other side of the table with mine.

I said, 'How is it?'

There was no answer.

'Do you like it crispier?'

The look he gave me was withering. I simply couldn't equate my experience with Ivor in this house, with the man trading with Papa. He'd been drinking very heavily. Even Papa could be nasty when he had a hangover.

My decisions came easily enough. I wouldn't judge before tomorrow when I'd be less tired and hungry. And I'd not have this man treating me so badly ever again, no matter the reason. And, I'd make my own future. My own choices. My own career.

I tried conversation. 'You were going to tell me what Erin said.'

'What?'

The look turned to pure scorn. I had no idea why and I didn't ask because he was pushing away from the table and leaving the house.

I recovered from that well enough to clear away before checking out what to make for the next meal, which could be any time. Domestic life would then be swiftly under control and I could begin planning my new life.

There was no hot water. I boiled the kettle, washed up with distaste for the grease and wiped over the kitchen surfaces. I then spotted Zakes Wife going through the green door.

I hurried to meet her in there. She wasn't alone. Several women, and girls, were filling their baskets, smiling and exchanging a few daring words.

One of them asked the girl I knew, breathlessly, 'Did you sit at Zake's table this morning?'

She nodded and moved away.

As soon as she was alone I sidled up to her. 'I have no idea what to make for the next meal.'

'You'll get me killed,' she whispered.

I leant in earnestly. 'You could just leave him.'

She observed me with pity, of all things. 'Can you make a stew?'

'There's no cooker.'

'You must know how to light the fire!'

'An open fire?'

'In the range.'

Something occurred to her. Something that terrified her. She glanced around to see if anyone was listening. I copied and found the others too busy talking about various experiences of sitting at the kitchen table and the promise of meat for dinner. They were too giddy to care about Zakes Wife or me.

She said, 'They'll be gone until the sun is high. I'll fetch my pot and we'll make the stew at Ivor's house. I'll teach you breadmaking too.'

'That's very kind of...'

'You have no idea,' she responded flatly, placing the necessary groceries in my basket, as she loaded hers up.

Later, with the stew in the oven, I piled more coal on the fire, shut that door and stood in the awful heat of the kitchen, trying to wash the coal dust off my hands.

Even with the sun beating down on the yard it was less hot out there than inside. Only then did I realise what the tremendous heat was and how the children were obliged to bear it whilst not sitting at their father's table. Had I felt less puzzled I'd have been furious. And a damn sight wiser.

The women sat in the yard making clay pots and sewing. They ceased their friendly chatter when I tried joining each group so, naturally, I sat quietly on the periphery of Zakes Wife's motley little group of wretches. She wasn't much included even with this lot but at least the others ignored me too and continued with their stilted conversation.

'Do you think we'll be able to sit at the table this evening?'

'And eat meat?'

'Maybe move the children away from the range again.'

'We're allowed baths later this afternoon.'

Are you sure?'

'Sim told me this morning.' Sims Wife smiled shyly, 'He's always gentle after I've bathed.'

Others also smiled knowingly.

'I haven't been beaten since yesterday.'

Several looked doubtfully at Zakes Wife.

'It's true.'

They gasped.

I was astonished. 'You don't have to put up with it, for goodness sake!'

They began packing their stuff away.

'No, wait, listen. Don't you know it's against the law?'

One of the more senior ones stopped what she was doing and looked to the others. 'Ivors Wife is not from a Fort.'

Obviously, they'd been gossiping about me.

'Perhaps this leniency is her influence.'

Now they were still and studied me.

I pressed home the advantage, 'Why would you believe they have the right to slap you?'

'Slap?' Sims Wife huffed over a gaff of some kind.

Another took time to explain to a stranger, 'It only happens when you're bad.'

And another, 'Or if you make a mistake.'

'Everyone makes...'

'Or if you're unlucky,' Zakes Wife added miserably.

I saw knowing eyes pointed at her and her unbelieved words.

One of them offered advice. 'You get beaten because you do stupid things. Try harder.'

Sims Wife added with an almost kind tone, 'I have never heard of such leniency before, not even in grandmothers' tales. Try really hard to please your husband, Zakes Wife.'

We had three days, growing more relaxed and with me making friends, and plans, and realising where Win's daft group got their ideas from, when one day I came in for lunch and heard laughter. Ivor's laughter. I felt a flutter of joy. A corner turned. Until I heard his words.

'She really believes I enjoy that foul kuffing stew.' He laughed louder, 'And that she's got some say in my behaviour.'

I decided to make my presence known. I stood in the open doorway of Ivor's study, fuming.

'I've tried really hard with you! You've given me nothing...'

Zake was standing by the door. He slammed it in my face without so much as looking in my direction.

I banged on it, shouting, 'We'll talk about this Ivor!'

Their silence was more ominous than the laughter. I hadn't forgotten for one second that he'd slapped me. Or his behaviour on our wedding night of all nights.

Only then did Papa's words come back to me. The culture here was different. And I'd chosen to opt in. It behoved me to meet them halfway. Images flashed in my mind as only then did I realise Ivor had

been disgusted by my clothing when I visited with Papa. Now I knew the dress code here I realised I'd misinterpreted some of his attention back then. I noted also, that the ladies here were quiet in their manner. They certainly did not shout demands and ultimatums at their husbands. Ivor had probably been letting steam off by laughing and confessing his view of my cooking to a friend.

My natural optimism resurfaced as I carefully took the stew from the oven, tasted it, and added more seasoning. I thought of how father did his share of the cooking at home but didn't have to work in the hot sun, in the fields. This now seemed like a fair division of labour. I guessed it would take me longer to get and run my own farm than I'd imagined.

Because I'd learned how to keep the bread fresh and warm, everything was just right when Ivor and Zake emerged from the study.

I was, for a moment, confused, when Zake sat at the table, in my chair. But I soon calmed. There'd be enough for three, with the bread. I looked around for another chair.

I heard Ivor laughing again and put on the smile I thought he wanted to see.

When he saw me starting to ladle the food into a third dish he said, 'No.' 'Excuse me?'

His expression turned cold. Vicious even. 'Fill two dished only.'

Fearing my husband suffered from an unpredictable mental condition I tried to see Zake's expression. He was chuckling quietly.

'Well, you obviously don't think I'm completely worthless if I can afford you amusement!'

Ivor was around the table and punching me in the stomach before I had any idea what was happening. He was fast enough to pull me clear of the food as I dropped to the floor in agony.

When I could see again, what I saw was Ivor and Zake at the table, eating heartily. I tried to speak. I needed a doctor. There was some serious damage done.

Only when Ivor glanced my way to check my efforts to move and to speak did it register that this was it. No doctor. No help. No hope.

I heard women's screams. Some close and some more distant. Long howling and short yelps. Bangs and deep male shouting. It was as though the entire Fort was under attack. Yet these two men continued calmly with their meal.

In a daze, I heard them scraping their dishes, slopping gravy-soaked bread as they talked, and Ivor agreeing with enthusiasm.

'Better than that. She'll dig the kuffing hole.'

Zake huffed satisfaction with whatever that promise was.

The next time I came round I recognised it was the heat of the range and shock, as much as the physical assault, that had caused me to pass out.

I was staggering to my feet, depressed to see the dishes left on the table and pot dried out by the range, planning on simply walking out of the Fort, when Ivor burst in the door.

He dragged me to the table, turned me around roughly, stuffed the greasy dishcloth in my mouth to quieten me, and again raped me brutally. Only when he'd finished did I see that Zake was watching. Even so he kept me bent over with one hand pressing down on my back and the other grinding my face into the table. He kept my dress up and over my back as he invited Zake to help himself. The man was more interested in humiliating me than anything else. As Zake withdrew from me, Ivor said, 'Did you really believe you'd be sitting at my table? Clean this mess up before I get home. Slut!'

When it was over, I dropped to my knees. But I didn't cry until after they'd left. It took a long time, but eventually the sobbing subsided. Fear and anger served me well for the vigorous scrubbing of pots and dishes when I realised I couldn't even face leaving this house, never mind the Fort.

By the next morning any fighting spirit I once possessed, was utterly destroyed. Even then I dragged my feet when ordered to follow the other women to what I'd only ever seen as a small, locked back exit to the Fort. Ivor pushed on my back to get me moving.

Ahead of the crowd I could hear a girl screaming, high-pitched amidst male voices jeering. The women were silent. When I demanded, weakly, to know what was happening they said nothing. Fumbling, I tried to grab one of them to get my answer. She pushed me away with more strength than I could muster.

We spilled out into a desert area behind the Fort. Ivor pushed a short-handled spade into my hands, shoved me to a bare patch between mounds of sand, and told me to start digging. I caught sight of where Zake held his young wife by the hair. Ivor's angry and aggressive manner had me trying to avoid the kind of punch I feared would kill me.

I shovelled dry, flowing sand well enough to begin digging the more solid ground beneath it. Whenever I slowed up Ivor slapped me.

A message was being sent to the other women: not even an educated, self-assured woman from outside the Fort, one who knew the law, could have any rights. The day of leniency had been deliberately calculated to give me time to try to persuade the women here to fight back. So, in the process of proving they never would, Erin turned even them against me.

What I didn't know then was exactly how calculated this punishment was going to be for me personally.

I was shoved and slapped until the hole reached to my shoulders. I continued digging, crying and squealing until Ivor grabbed my arm, wrenching my shoulder as he dragged me out. When I began spluttering a poor objection, he ripped my dress down the middle, exposing my breasts to all the men standing there laughing.

That was not the worst. I looked to the other women for help. I'd have screamed at their cowardice, as I clutched the edges of my torn dress, hiding my body, but something else was going on with them. It wasn't me they were looking at.

I had no comprehension of that until Zakes Wife was dragged across and dropped feet first into the hole I had dug. Ivor moved behind me, grasping my shoulders to be certain I couldn't turn away.

Zakes Wife was crying, sobbing bitterly, but she made no attempt to get out. When Erin stepped forward to speak, she even quietened so that he could be heard.

'Now you will see,' he addressed only the men, 'your Fort has the only laws that need affect you.'

Even then... Even then, I didn't know what the wave of his hand signified. Ivor held me solidly while the men began filling the hole around Zakes Wife, with sand. As the sand went in, Zake pulled her straight, by her hair. I literally could not believe the reality of this. How long would she be left like that, buried up to her neck?

But that wasn't it. Not even that. Ivor threw me to the ground as he, along with the other men, scattered to pick up stones and any rocks they could hold in one hand. They took their time. They were selective. Women trembled and wept silently while Zakes Wife, now only half conscious from the heat and pressure of that awful confinement, screwed her eyes closed.

I was still stooping from my fall, trying to hold my dress together while clearing sand from my mouth, when I saw Zake's fist fly back and then forward, hurling a large piece of rock handed him by Ivor. It struck Zakes Wife on the side of the head. There was deep murmuring approval for a good shot that didn't spoil their sport by knocking her unconscious before all had their turn.

Her screams rose to an animalistic level. I had never, ever, in all my life, been close to imagining her horror. Seeing it on her face. Hearing it. Howling and keening over it.

Unthinking I stumbled across, trying to shield her head with my body. Three stones thumped agonisingly into my back, the pain and shock taking my breath, before Ivor dragged me away.

I shouted at the other women to help the girl but they all followed some unwritten rule. Only one tried to avert her gaze but she watched when her husband pulled her head back, by the hair.

The same was true for me. Ivor had my hair coiled tight around his fist, and with my head pointed in the direction that forced me to watch the torment of Zakes Wife.

Her head was knocked to the side as another stone gouged out another lump, her cheek this time, splattering more blood and landing scarlet gore in the sand around her poor, fractured face.

She no longer cried out. Her broken, pulped head lolled amidst the pieces of her flesh, clumps of hair and wet, red sand. The men stared at their justice done while not one woman looked away, or hardly breathed. Zake strolled over, stooped slowly and took his time feeling for the pulse in her neck.

My voice, emerging in a hoarse whisper, was an automatic reaction, not aimed at anyone, 'Is she dead?'

Ivor's voice, closer to my ear than I'd been remotely prepared for, said, 'Not yet.'

Then Sim handed Zake a shovel and the poor girl's husband proceeded to pile hot, fine sand over her head. Sobbing, crumbling yet held more or less upright by my hair, my heart, my whole body breaking, I tried to make an objection. But I found no sound. No strength.

There was a pathetic reaction to the start of her suffocation and time stood still, until a new mound was left in the sand with the many others.

When Ivor released me, I fell to the ground. I would have crawled across to dig her body out with my hands, except practical insight had me knowing she was better left alone, at the very least unconscious now, and soon to be permanently free of Zake.

I sensed, rather than watched the men walking past their wives and back into the Fort. There was some self-righteous growling but mostly they were quiet.

By the time I came round well enough to look around me, my unfocused eyes told me all I needed to know. All the women were gone too. Somehow, I heaved myself to sitting, slumped and lost.

The sun was setting when Corins Wife shook my shoulder and told me coldly that I had to go back into the Fort.

I tried to object but she pulled me to my feet and hissed in my ear, 'I will be the next one out here if you cause more trouble.'

'What? Me?' I tried shaking sense into my head, 'You? How...'

'Shut up! Get into your husband's house and serve his dinner. It's in the oven.'

'But...'

'Do it!'

By the time she'd dragged me back into the Fort she wore no expression that I could read.

She pushed me into Ivor's house, and as the door closed he came out of his study. He had Zake with him. They sat at the table. And though my hands shook violently I managed to serve up the stew Corins Wife had made. Then I sat on the floor by the hot range and tried to swallow my dry bread.

Days passed in which I cooked and cleaned silently and joined young girls being taught to coil pots and weave the rough material that only women's clothes were made from. I was even relieved to hear that Zake was using one of his daughters for sex in spite of Ivor's offer for him to use me.

I had lost all thought of escape or memory even of a better place, until we all looked to the fearful sound of a piercing, unidentified noise in the sky. I recognised a plane, at first hovering and then landing much closer to the Fort than Papa ever had.

At the time, I was stumbling back from the cold store because Ivor had slapped me for being stupid enough to run out of tea. For a moment, a flash of hope went unrecognised. Minutes later my heart pounded

violently when the huge main doors to the Fort burst open. Men were emerging from their houses. In a fog of confusion, I recognised police uniforms pouring in through the gateway. With no fight left in me, beyond self-pity and reason, I stood lost and crying when I recognised Win and Papa.

My sister strode straight to me, gently enfolded me in her arms, choked and cleared her throat.

'Father confessed.'

'What?' I could hardly find a voice so rarely used these days.

'On one of his drinking nights, guilt had him babbling about what he'd done to you.'

'I don't understand.'

'Oh, my darling sister.'

'Tell me.'

'He thought he could make a deal. That he could have someone on the inside speaking in his favour for trading. Preparing him for what Erin would want to buy.'

'Papa?'

'Yes, Rona. Even Papa.'

Think that was too strong? The sex and violence gratuitous, perhaps? I worried about that prior to publication and considered replacing it with something milder. Then I read a report in The Times newspaper (UK) describing the appalling experiences of a large number of Rohingya women at the hands of the Tatmadaw of the Burmese army. The suffering inflicted on them because of, and intensified by, their own husbands' belief system, was immeasurably worse than anything I have described here. Many die as a result of the sexual attacks and the survivors rarely even speak of their awful injuries to one another because of the traditions they are subject to within their society. They are victims twice over.

Anger keeps this story in the book. It is here to give voice, though ever so small, to the wretched scapegoats of the legitimization processes that perpetuate all misogynistic societies.

Spliced Genes

Because Peers were not famed for hunting early in the day, they were caught off guard. In the trees, the three poachers prioritised staying out of view, whilst hoping still to retrieve the dead prey from their traps. Lastly, if possible, they'd attempt to take the traps too. The Peers might never notice the trampled grass and broken shrubs if they could steal away with it all.

Only when activity in the clearing increased did sneaking away empty-handed feel like the best they could aim for. So, they held their positions, still and hardly breathing, each behind a large tree trunk and thick undergrowth.

The female sped into the clearing, crying and begging. She'd been running along the narrow bridleway: a path occasionally used by the Peers and always avoided by poachers. Even very low-grade blends trespassing in a desperate search for mushrooms or berries knew better than to leave a scent that could be traced by a Peer's chimera.

Kora assessed the plight of this wretched victim in moments. They'd been hunting her for some time and although the composition of her head told plainly of a poor genetic blend, she was not a scavenger. Her clothes, now torn and ragged, had been fresh only hours ago and she had none of the tell-tale, weeping scabs and sores. Almost certainly she had been a servant in one of their castles and this was her punishment. Or merely their sport.

Worn out and desperate, she spent too many vital seconds trying to decide whether or not to continue at some speed along the path exiting the clearing, or risk further tearing her bare feet by veering off into the forest.

Those wasted moments saw all options stolen, as a middle-aged Peer emerged slowly from what just might have been her escape route. Had the situation been less precarious for them, Kora and her fellow hidden law-breakers might have been amused by the sight of a fat man astride a small pony-like creature with flowing lilac mane and tail.

Horrified, the strange female turned to face two other Peers appearing, grinning, from the bridleway. In the lead was a young, healthy mid-twenties pure human straddling a very large dog-like beast with prominent, vicious canines snarling horror into the woman now backing away from it.

Lagging a little behind and laughing too heartily to hardly remain on the bare back of his hybrid, came a powerfully built Peer about a decade older than his companion. The source of his hilarity was two-fold: his mount was an enormous pink hog with rudimentary wings, and his prey was turning in terrified circles, pleading with each man in turn.

It was a situation that required no interpretation. Within the gloom of the woodland, Kora could just make out the expression in her husband's eyes: Jiran was warning her not to move or react in any way. She turned to Andi, whose hiding place was a little closer than Jiran's. The hermaphrodite blend who currently preferred to be spoken of in

feminine pronouns, was less adamant than Jiran. Though equally doubtful they could offer any effective help.

The Peers were happy to take their time.

The fat one, dismounting clumsily from the slight and pretty pony, spoke to the one on the pig. ‘How do you want it, Templeton? Naked? Half-naked? Conscious?’

Lord Templeton tossed one leg forward over the animal’s wide back and sat sideways for a moment, easing his inside thigh muscles. ‘Naked. Its body is hilariously disgusting.’

The third, Lord Rhyss, edged menacingly closer on his hound hybrid. Its large snout with flaring nostrils had the female backing up, into the meaty hands of Lord Graystock. Her threadbare shirt was easily ripped across the chest. More growling had him grappling with her clawing hands to tear the poor fabric away at the seams and binding. Rhyss’ mount, excited by the noise and action began rearing and snarling in preparation to get involved in the attack and sent her rider sprawling.

With one brutal hand restraining the woman by her wrist, Graystock laughed at his fellow’s predicament. Rhyss saved face by springing to his feet in order to land a mighty kick on the rump of an animal that had the intelligence to not turn on its master. The Peer smoothed back his blonde hair, and tightened the ponytail while his sparkling blue eyes warned their victim that she would be paying a terrible, agonisingly protracted penalty for her crime.

Meanwhile, ignoring the other Peers’ rivalry Templeton stepped slowly closer to the being that had resulted from his father’s poor bio-engineering.

He grabbed the waistband at the front of her long skirt, grazing her stomach with his fingernails, as he pulled her pelvis closer to his. He hissed into her face, ‘Let them look at you!’

The woman cried out in shame and horror as much from the imminent exposure of her faulty genes, as in fear of what they were certain to do to her.

So far Kora had noted only a negatively affected head crowning a body with a great figure. Luscious full and firm breasts had been revealed but when the skirt was ripped away the results of someone’s exceptionally dismal science were plain for all to see.

Graystock, still with the painful grip on her wrist, held her arm high, preventing her from collapsing, while Templeton turned her roughly for Rhyss to view.

Of her three surviving siblings, this throw-back to an old system of gene-splicing had inherited the greatest surface area of reptile scales. They replaced the pubic hair normally seen on most, even low-grade, females. In shades of brown and flaking, they ran in tracks down the backs of her legs. They were larger and courser than those Kora had noted with pity, on the woman’s right cheek. She cried miserably for the humiliation of being jerked around to give the youngest man a view he’d not seen before. Now Kora also observed the scales of her face extending

down her neck and on to her shoulder and upper arm. Somehow even worse, those scales ripened into scrappy little feathers on her lower arm.

Kora's mouth dropped open as she took in the entire sight of the female. Once again, she studied the head of what she knew to be a woman of enough intelligence to understand her immediate fate. She could probably imagine the torture that would follow. The poacher felt great pity for a being who, rather than having hair on her head, sported sparse, stunted quills on a pale scalp. So horribly incongruous with her pretty face and gleaming blue eyes.

The fat man propelled her into the arms of Rhyss, freeing up his own hands to begin unfastening his flies.

Templeton kicked at her feet, being sure to draw attention to the horny growths over her three largest toes, 'You can only get lower than this if you mount your mount, Graystock.'

He helped the youngest Peer bend the struggling victim over the back of the pig-like creature as all laughed about the various other positions they'd place her in.

Though fearing exposing her friends to similarly ferocious treatment, Kora could neither watch this nor run from it.

She clattered out into the clearing, shouting out her outrage and fury. Despite shock and anger with his wife, Jiran automatically followed. Nothing would be gained by his begging her to retreat. The Peers would not forgive this. Far from it. She would suffer the same punishment as the victim she wished to save. She had no plan; sketchy or otherwise.

Andi, having hesitated a little longer than her friends, did set off after them with a plan of sorts. Only one course of action now, could save them from a fate literally worse than death: the deaths of the noblemen.

Kora's particular genetic combination rendered her unusually strong and fleet of foot. Lord Rhyss, being the first to recover from her surprise appearance, almost caught hold of her, but the specific talents of her biological inheritance, had her dodging him. And rather than take note of her husband's shouts of anguish, it was Andi's loud and clear words she took note of.

She caught the closed gin trap thrown by her friend and yanked it open. Graystock, lumbering across to help his young fellow snag her, fell flat on his face from Jiran's sweeping kick to his feet. Now, ablaze with fury, yelling Peers made thunderous, vicious and graphic threats for the audacity of what they rightly identified as poachers. In those moments of bedlam Kora's powerful fingers pulled the trap wide enough for her to leap and slot it over the young Peer's clean and perfect head.

The sharp teeth of the contraption's jaws snapped into place, biting as deep into his neck as the poachers had hoped it would into the leg of an animal of the forest. He fell with his partially severed head gushing blood and landing at a terrible angle to his collapsed and juddering body.

Templeton flung his captive to the side as Graystock rose, swaying, to his feet. Both men bellowed and snarled savagely whilst

making a considered response that had the three poachers even more terrified, if such a thing were possible. They were calling in their chimeras.

Andi's rapid reaction was the most useful. It was dictated by the butcher's knife she held in her hand. For once in her life her particular genetic combination served her well. As the bobbing of her curly, bright ginger-haired head caught a moment's attention, the extraordinary power and accuracy of a thrown blade stopped Templeton's calls. And his heart.

Graystock's small fairy tale horse moved in, bucking and kicking to protect him. Rhyss' awful canine hybrid turned attention from howling over its master's mutilated corpse, to Kora, who panicked in the awareness that it possessed extra-sensory awareness.

Andi was swiftest in responding to her plight. She ripped the knife out of Templeton's chest to send it flying into the canine hybrid's flank. It sank deep but the creature was not felled.

Prepared now, to play a more effective part in saving his wife's life, Jiran dived at the great beast with the poison-tipped spear he'd been carrying for protection against milder beasts than this, in the forest. He jabbed it in close to the protruding knife hilt and as the animal swung around, maintained his grip on it, tearing it free to jab into its ghastly, snorting muzzle. Sharp claws caught his arm and hand but his grasp of the weapon did not waiver.

Now Andi, using her same self-protective weapon stabbed in more of the noxious substance. The pricking from two sides, the bucking and screaming of Graystock's mount, along with his own frantic cries, and the arrival of the great pink hog, had it reeling in sensory overload. Its confusion provided Andi with the opportunity to heave out her well-honed knife and plunge it into the creature's neck. More by luck than judgement she had arterial blood spraying a thick coating across the clearing, as the thing whorled and shrieked.

Graystock tried mounting his brave little pony but it never was going to furnish a fast getaway. Not with that burden. Acutely aware that from the minute she rushed out recklessly to save the poor woman now scrabbling for anything to cover her body, Kora resolved to kill the last Peer. She jumped across, bowling him off the animal, grabbing its reins as he tumbled. She had them wound around his throat before he hit the ground. It was the chimera's rearing and stamping that pulled the leather straps tight enough to strangle the life out of him.

Breathing heavily now, she and Andi surveyed the horrific scene of butchery while Jiran, finally thinking more clearly, completed their crime. There was no telling what intelligence or communication they might pass on to the other Peers had he not dispatched the little horse and the hog.

They watched, dazed and shocked by the terrible results of their actions, as Jiran removed his own ragged coat to offer the miserable, pained victim of the Peers.

As Kora helped her into it and fastened it down the front, noting that although it reached her knees it failed to cover all that the wretched blend was afraid of, she asked her name.

'It,' the female whispered.

Jiran drew closer, 'You are not an it.'

Andi approached, offering further support, 'You can choose any name, if you were never given one.'

'No,' she breathed in the wake of a lifetime of tortured slavery.

'Yes,' Kora assured gently.

'I had a sister named Yutha,' Jiran added softly. 'I would like to have a new sister. May we call you Yutha?'

She made no reply as she brushed glances guardedly across the carnage around her.

Always fast-thinking, quickly-recovering and practical, it was Andi who had them moving. She led the way through thick undergrowth to a lively stream. They plunged into the cold water, moving awkwardly with the current whilst stumbling over the loose stones of the bedrock.

While Kora lagged behind, helping Yutha, Jiran waded heavily, shoulder to shoulder with Andi. 'At some point we'll have to get out. Then their bloodhounds will detect our tracks.'

One aspect of Yutha's complex blended genes had resulted in a particularly acute auditory system. On hearing of that dilemma, she picked up her pace and caught up to Andi, tapping on her shoulder.

'There is an isolated cave ahead. We can enter it without leaving the water.'

Andi was dubious, 'How do you know?'

Again, a display of agonising shame, and some other masked emotion, passed over the woman's face. 'I can hear the creatures in there.'

Jiran seemed to sense something of that which she tried to hide and wiped disgust from his features before turning to her, 'You sense hive minds.'

She nodded stiffly.

Having caught up with what she thought to be the main thrust of the conversation, Kora asked, 'What kind of creatures?'

'Unpleasant in appearance but harmless to...,' she hesitated before finishing, 'us.'

They'd placed themselves in a situation that, unless Yutha was correct, had them doomed. There was no need for further discussion as they ploughed through the water in single file, with Yutha taking the lead.

The stream flowed past a relatively calm, shallow pool, and the sound of rushing water ahead warned them they'd make little more progress along this route.

Yutha waded to the right and scrambled over a tumultuous weir into the calm of the pool, before following a narrow tributary into the rocks. They could hear the howls of bloodhounds in the distance and entered the dark cavern with some hope and a little relief.

Jiran took his wife's arm as they fell into an increasingly darkening interior until they could feel the water losing depth. It was hardly lapping their ankles when they became aware of the animals whose domain they invaded.

Large, dimly-glowing toad-like reptiles reacted to the disturbance with a resounding crackling noise produced by the rubbing of fine-veined, transparent wings in what appeared to be leaders.

Kora looked to where she could just make out Yutha's blank expression. She was communing with the hive.

Rather than accepting her though, they were becoming more agitated. As they drew closer to the three friends huddling together, back-to-back in a defensive triangle, with their wide, vicious toothed jaws clicking, Yutha worked at her attempts to placate them.

The poachers fended them off with their spears, now with the poison almost certainly washed from their tips. It was becoming a losing battle. Jiran pulled his hand back but failed to escape injury. A quick glance assured him of nothing worse than a deep gash. Andi kicked one in the head as it dipped low, grazing the ankle it had tried to bite into. Kora suffered a nastier wound from a talon sinking into her arm.

When at last Yutha had the aggressive creatures backing off, the poachers inspected one another's wounds as best they could. It was only after they realised no one had suffered potentially fatal injuries, that they heard the police outside.

The police were not in the water, but above the mouth of the cave, calling to one another. The fugitives had to assume this was just one group of many making a sweep of the area. They had seconds, minutes possibly, to plan an escape. In that time Yutha revealed an aspect of her biological make-up none of them had previously identified.

The awful, outsized toads had become enchanted by Yutha. She was in commune with them. In the faint glow they provided, Jiran, Kora and Andi checked one another's expressions for signs of a workable scheme. Each read only terror in the eyes of the others.

Kora whispered tremulously, 'If we lure the police in, Yutha can have those things attacking them while we slip out.'

Already ahead of that and with the added hope the police could be killed, Andi now gave voice to the questions that naturally followed. 'Will the beasts obey her?'

Jiran added, 'Will they even let us leave?'

'Might they want to keep Yutha here?'

Kora's question brought on desperate betrayal from the others. She could discern their response to that. They could not risk any more for a low-grade blend.

Yutha's head fell to one side. Her sparsely-feathered hand rose to her temple. She seemed to be concentrating. The poachers began stealing themselves in readiness for calling the police down to the cave.

The bio-engineered reptiles turned their attention from Yutha, to her rescuers. When they resumed their chattering, croaking, snapping and

droning in increased volume, Kora and her friends felt to have their plan for attracting the police propelled into motion.

They were moving to the side of the cave, preparing to pass the creatures at the vital moment, when they saw a change in the attitude of both Yutha and her hive of like-minds. A clearer glimpse of that earlier unidentified emotion.

The mass attack was rapid, violent, bloody and hellish. While the animals ripped apart and began devouring the near-humans, and the fracas brought the police down to witness the demise of the murderers, Yutha slunk to the back of the cave, shielded by her new reptilian allies.

This story, inspired by Habitat, is not directly linked to any particular characters in the novel.

Habitat is in two parts. In Part 1, the heroes of the story question whether they live in a sanctuary or if they are in some way, captive there. Part 2 of Habitat, the driving force behind this story, features a ruling class living in luxury, a rebellion against this, blended genes, bio-engineering and synthetic biology.

Galleon

The icebergs are melting. The weather is weirding. Sea levels are rising. Animals are going extinct. All this, yet the population of the world doesn't seem to care. Enough is enough and someone needs to do something.

This is when Gaia steps in and takes control.

No more pointless climate change conferences and targets. Gaia has access to a new method of reshaping the world.

And humans are not all that important.

This story is based on the possible fate of some descendants of human survivors featured in DCZ: Designated Conservation Zone.

Internal problems had left us failing in the upkeep of the pier and the galleon. The bore came screaming up the river, higher and more violent than normal, and seriously damaging both. All that work lost because stupid, short-sighted Shannon went on her thick bloody crusade.

How did she put it? Oh yes, 'Women are not the property of men to be passed from one to another as though there's nothing more to us than ovaries and a womb.'

She became bogged down in ideals that, if she succeeded, could see us going extinct.

While she had half our small and dying population fighting one another, the jetty crumbled and the boat was not moved upstream in readiness to survive the worst of the bore. That fact still leaves me reeling.

Charlie tried everything to make the people understand the damage she was doing. To make them comprehend reality. To get them to accept sacrifices, in favour of survival. But she tapped into their perceived grievances. Of course, women are more than baby-producing machines, but we can't get pregnant can we? We had no other way of knowing who was still fertile. Not many, as it turned out.

So, Shannon created a social climate where far from working together to build the population, people were actually killing each other. It took Charlie longer to reach the decision than it did me. But only his orders counted, on our side.

It was me who was there though, when Abe did it. And I was thankful for that because I was ready and willing but not remotely as skilled. Shannon never went anywhere without Thelma and at least two others. Not even to the latrines. She'd reached the stage where she had all women sticking together 'for protection': them against rapists was the rhetoric. That insanely insulting exaggeration infuriated the men, naturally.

The day came, after Abe and I had been watching, discreetly, from alleys where the forest hadn't yet encroached, from second and third storeys that were only relatively safe. The heavy undergrowth at the outskirts there, could be very dangerous. Yet, as luck would have it, on this particular occasion when I met up with Abe out in the forest, to compare notes, there she was. Alone.

We had, of course, considered simply taking her by force, as an example. An undeniable display of power. And some would have. Some men could conceive of a life where their partners were tested against their wills. Believing they could then settle as a family with the one they could get pregnant. There were times when I questioned the need for human survival at all. The value of humanity.

Our subtle plan and the only one that could possibly work, was for Shannon to 'die of natural causes'. It would take time and patience, but we would then start building relationships again, work together as a community and address the only problem that mattered: a dangerously small gene pool.

She'd passed the overflowing latrines that the women alone couldn't keep under control while we men braved the forest to dig holes for crapping in. They were getting sick. Red-faced, weak and sweating, we had observed that Shannon had a fever. A bacterial infection, no doubt. Now she, like other women, headed for the jungle with a spade. Except this time she was alone because she had the shits and couldn't take time to search out a group to go with.

We watched from the trees as she dug the hole, hoisted up her ragged skirt and dumped. She was in the process of covering it over when I made my presence known.

The sound made was minimal. I scuffed the dry leaves to get her turning to me. But Abe cracked a couple of twigs getting behind her. She turned and gasped as he closed in. She had time to feel the terror before the squelching thud of his wooden club on her skull preceded the heavy crunching of her fall.

Once she was down, I kept watch. My eyes darted back through the trees to our crumbling settlement, for fear of getting caught by a human, into the forest for fear of getting attacked by an animal, and past Abe, at work on Shannon.

He'd prepared better tools than anything I'd thought of. He had a real lion paw with claws extended, and one of the small traps. He turned her on to her back and clamped the trap around her throat, just as she was coming to. I saw the horror in her bulging eyes when he snapped the trap shut. By the time he'd braced himself with a foot on her head and ripped it back with a 'mouthful' of flesh and bone, she was dead. He then raked the lion claw across her face, turned her body face down and added more marks to her back, tearing her blouse. I was the one to place a rock with her blood on it, to account for a hard bang on the head, seemingly from when she fell. It looked well-established, protruding from grass and ivy that seemed to have long-since tried to claim dominion over it.

The scene was already a convincing lion attack. Other animals might find her body and maul it further. But either way was fine.

We snuck back into town and cleaned up. No one ever knew. Except Charlie, of course. We needed our Mayor to begin getting security back to normal in preparation for saving the population. In comparison, one well-disguised murder was irrelevant. After her body was discovered

by a group of women and lamented over, we had a cathartic funeral in which a truce was agreed.

I began my part in repairing relationships by bringing our treacherous sister back into the family. Frankly, I'd rather have slapped her for betraying Charlie and me. Louise wasn't convinced we were planning a fair future or that we had a practical working scheme, but at least, now free of Shannon's influence, she was willing to listen to our point of view with an open mind.

With Shannon gone, Charlie and I were able to start work on a long-term survival strategy. That involved repairing the pier and galleon. A job rendered doubly difficult by the crocs living there. They always sensed the swell and left the water before the bore reached them. There was no chance of them getting washed upstream, or better still getting bashed in the break of the tidal wave. In fact, the vicious bastards turned their attention inland, sometimes even as far as the few solid buildings we had left.

Charlie opted for taking his team to repair the galleon, which included by then my lover Jody, who wasn't getting pregnant, making me realise I might be the sterile one since I took her because she already had a kid.

They set out through croc-infested water in a good strong rowing boat, propelled mainly by Abe's formidable muscle-power. That team had already begun making repairs and bailing water on the big river boat by the time I led my team to the jetty. We were going to need that back in working order because the women would almost certainly begin volunteering and we couldn't risk loading them on by riding a croc gauntlet in a rower.

The galleon, together with the pier, had been our principle reason for prosperity in the past and our hope for the future. Our Greenwich community was nothing without these. With no boat travelling the river, we couldn't even be certain there were still other survivors.

The crocs could only get onto the pier at the shallow end, close to land. So, the first job was to build the heavy gate that stopped them crawling up the length of it. I'm not much of a carpenter, so along with two others I took on the job of protecting the gate-makers.

They'd had all the sturdy posts and battens ready prepared and reached the stumps of the old gate before the first croc flopped on to the decking. It doesn't matter how many times you've faced beasts like that, the adrenalin doesn't pump any slower. Bloody primitive flaming monsters.

It wasn't possible to stand shoulder to shoulder in the narrow width of the boards, which left me feeling pretty much on my own. On the other hand, with this, the strongest spear I'd ever owned, I was feeling confident.

I wasn't even vaguely tempted to throw it. I'd done that once before, when I was hardly out of my teens. It got the hideous thing lumbering towards me, forcing me to run for it through croc-infested,

shallow waters. Where the river normally lapped gently at the land a tumultuous storm of rough hide, massive, gaping, razor-toothed mouths and crashing tails broke out.

That time I got out alive, with gashes, bone-deep bruising and half skinned, but nothing was broken and the damned things hadn't managed to spin me and drown me. It took a week for me to be able to even breathe properly again.

Since then I listened and learned. The only way to deal with one of those huge, vicious reptiles was to get the spear into its gaping maw and up through its soft palate, into the brain.

I needed space to retreat until the jaws were wide enough, so I approached the bugger. Hearing the gasps behind me almost stopped me. Yet I must demonstrate what I'd come to know.

The general movement of humans that normally kept their distance was probably what had it spooked. Rather than simply slap about on the landing stage, it came straight for me. Fast. I did the stupid, half-witted lion roar and wide arms that had its crazy eyes gleaming and huge mouth wide for attack, took four quick, steady strides, backwards, ducked low and thrust the sharp, poisoned, flint-tipped end of my spear up and deep through its palate.

The problem was, it fell off the walkway, taking my spear with it, into a broiling mass of hissing, milling, splashing beasts. And another was lumbering towards me.

I shuffled back to where the rest of my team had retreated behind the gate they were rapidly lashing into place. If that temporary measure failed, they'd have nowhere to go. We'd not begun to repair that end of the walkway and crocs cruised around the posts in the water between the few metres of falling boards and the galleon.

Always with plenty of prey in the water, these animals were never hungry. Neither were they great thinkers. I have no idea why it halted but that gave me time to look up to the frantic movement behind it. I saw Jody, always loyal, leaping about to get my attention. Rather than being grateful for the spear she offered, I was angry. She was fertile. She would volunteer. She should not risk her life for mine.

Nevertheless, I caught it cleanly, goaded the croc, speared it through the roof of its mouth and scrambled behind the gate while it made its awful hollow coughing noises as it lay twitching.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Saving your life, dope.'

'Move away from the bank, Jody!'

'OK. Keep your hair on.'

She wasn't getting far enough away. 'We need you in good health.'

'Like I said, dope,' she called softly, 'I won't be doing anything useful if you don't get that pier fixed.'

Taking time over that exchange was beyond ridiculous. I clambered back over the fence, yanked the spear out of the croc's maw, and told her to

get back to her part in this venture. She grinned. I probably loved her more than ever in that moment.

Following that drama and still on the alert for more of the buggers, I allowed time to catch my breath while the others continued making repairs. I noted Charlie's team's good progress on the galleon and slipped into some reflection. They were preparing to set off for the trading we'd been forced to abandon for many years. Following a number of unexplained illnesses, just as we were beginning to get some order back in the community, including realising we had a sterility problem, one woman decided to make a bid for power she couldn't handle. And other women supported her because of her constant accusations concerning unjustified grievances, including my brother's place as Mayor. That position began with Grandfather when he was hailed as the hero of Greenwich. Then father was elected. In his time, we'd come close to losing everyone several times, in a number of different ways through no fault of his. So, when he died, the last thing anyone cared about in our tiny population, was an election.

Charlie took charge. It was that or anarchy. He further developed the boat Grandfather had built, reinforced the outer fencing of the living area, and now prepared to re-establish trade. But there was still a lot to do.

My memories brought me full circle as I watched Jody's back view, safely clear of crocs, and addressing a group of women who'd once only listened to someone who was in danger of seeing us wiped out, rather than re-building.

My hopes began rising. There were getting on for twenty women listening to her. There was no telling at that stage how many would volunteer but at the very least we had a practical starting place.

During that assessment I'd also been keeping an eye on other progress. Both main jobs were moving along. Repairs to the galleon looked sturdy and my gate was now solidly in position when the job was finished. We'd get back to land in rowing boats. I'd then clear the jetty on the land side of the gate but only when we were ready to load up the women.

While I watched my crew precariously hanging from ropes between the gate and the galleon, laying boards to secure the river side of the pier, I mentally worked through the morality of this scheme, again. I didn't like the choices we'd been obliged to make but I simply could not give in.

With Charlie's position restored and the fortress secure the building of our population had to be our priority, otherwise why bother to keep drawing air? There simply was no other way to increase our gene pool at a time when we had every reason to believe birth defects were the result of inbreeding.

I loved my brother. As I said, not everyone did. He could be a hard task master and that could easily be interpreted by the ignorant, as tyranny. They'd not have survived the last bout of rebellion without him.

That is when our police system disintegrated while people stole one another's garden produce, leaving the weakest families to starve. To death.

That memory hung heavy as I judged the laying of the last board on the jetty. While my people hammered that home, I waited for our bulky rower to be pushed towards us, alongside and below the level of the walkway. I caught the weighted end of the towline as it landed on my side of the gate, and took some reptile attention away from Charlie's crew who were preparing for their return trip. It was movement of the small boat I heaved along by its rope, that excited the animals.

There was no point in waiting for calm. One at a time, we jumped from the pier down to the boat and quickly steadied it, so far as was possible. At this stage, taking the boat upstream to land on the bank some distance from the main population, was our best chance. During that treacherous journey, we'd rocked close to rolling over, but in the end we cleared the crashing mass of beasts only because they turned their focus to Charlie's team still loading on to their rowers.

Once safely on land I watched Charlie's precarious predicament. His solid little rower was being tossed around in the turmoil of the eight-foot crocs. Charlie's nerves of steel had him calming his crew, with one woman bailing water and another bracing herself to keep the tiller on course. Men relaxed, a little, rowing only when necessary, while Charlie used the punting pole to push the boat in a manner that excited the animals less intensely.

To my shame, my first thought when he arrived on dry land, was relief that my brother, as Mayor, would be obliged to execute the dangerous enterprise we'd prepared jointly.

Pushing on now, I joined Jody. She'd gathered more listeners. She had forced them to watch the dangers we'd face in preparation for this mission. Others now joined in supporting her as she called out the facts facing us.

'Shannon would never have allowed us to be used like this,' one shouted above the various viewpoints being vociferously aired.

I strode forward, not actually yelling but nevertheless in her face, 'What is your alternative?'

'We could join another settlement.'

'OK. Which one?'

I don't know if she believed in her half-baked proposal or if she simply didn't want to back down. 'Any upriver!'

'How do you know they're safe? How do you know they're even still there?'

Now all others listened to our exchange.

'We've traded with them in the past. We...'

'No! Not we. My grandfather and then my father led trading excursions. My brother has volunteered to lead this expedition. But you...' I poked her shoulder hard, 'have done nothing!'

'Get your hands off...'

I looked to the growing group where more people came to investigate the raised voices. ‘We have to stick together. We know one another. We can trust one another again. We can build this population. When we’re strong and healthy our children and grandchildren can be the ones to choose who they’ll allow to join them. One day this will be a secure stone-built town. Your progeny could well be the future of the entire human race. This is our duty!’

Zoe left her place with Charlie’s team, to step up to Jody’s other side, ‘I’m going on the trip. I believe I can get pregnant. Who’s with me?’

Jody shared a secret smile with me for both of us being upstaged, while Zoe pointed to individuals, asking if they would join her. She had almost thirty volunteers at the end of that. More than we’d hoped for.

Wasting no time, I led my team back to the jetty while even more women began showing up as volunteers.

Clearing crocs from the land side of the jetty gate was no small feat. This was a considerably improved process now, with Abe’s help. Louise, with her partner Corin, led the female volunteers, followed by Charlie with the rest of his crew for the galleon, while we held the reptiles at bay. There was speed in that long procession boarding the galleon. Although it arose from fear of the crocs, it instilled a sense of purpose.

As I watched them boarding safely, I was reminded of the building of the galleon. When my Grandfather began the project, it wasn’t envisioned being remotely as effective as it later became. In fact, it began as a copy of a Viking longboat, with ten rowers on each side and a large well-deck for holding items to be traded as well as bring back much needed supplies, and game from hunting.

As the crocs re-established dominion over the pier, I began imagining the fruits of Charlie’s trading. He loved books. He used to search out history books in particular. I suggested we should record our own accounts as passed down the generations of our family; of how we came to be in this state. The few printed history books we found claimed that a revolution had saved the world. Clearly it saved one aspect of the world. Nature was thriving but only in a limited context. Humans were not included or valued.

My eyes refocused on the crocs and then the galleon. Its magnificence began in our father’s time, when he further developed the sturdy, steady boat. He added more banks of oars: the twenty-four that remained optimum. What had been basic boarded covering much like our garden shed, was strengthened and internal galleries halfway up each end of the large inner space were built for sleeping quarters. We prepared that private space for the volunteer women; making it comfortable and safe. Father had a watertight hold constructed for storing grain, roots and berries, improved the steering and redesigned the masts and sails. Even though they could only be of occasional use there were times when they moved the boat swiftly passed perilous situations.

We had only the one map which was drawn in father’s time. The course of the river was seen to be narrowing and meandering less

markedly further inland. The depth, clearly shown, was less shallow than at the time of this account. Grass hills, settlements and areas of young trees were marked with the names given them by people who claimed ownership of them. Also, clearly marked, were large areas of the ruins of brick-built towns that were rumoured to have been thriving powerhouses only a few generations before Grandfather's time.

We were riding on hope more than reason, when discussing the nature and numbers of trading partners Charlie might encounter and with a weight of cargo limited by the draft of the galleon in shallow waters. Furthermore, we had very little of value to trade, other than manpower along with some specialist skills. And crocodile skins.

Following this latest preparation, Charlie and the others set off carefully with only the small headsail raised and all rowers heaving slowly in unison. I'm told that those who were believers in fate began wailing when a storm kicked up less than an hour into the excursion. It was fierce. So dangerous were the gales that Charlie asked Zoe's advice on abandoning the boat in a stretch of the river running through forest that would be thick with predators. The general view was that less than half of them would make it to the shore. Probably less.

As the boat took on water everyone, crew and volunteer women, bailed with anything and everything they could lay hands on. When the rains finally abated, many fell from exhaustion. But they were still afloat.

As the sun strove valiantly to cast her watery light along the turbulent stretch of river, Corin, as navigator, began picking out landmarks on the map. By the time they reached their first designated stop, the water was calm enough for a relatively simple mooring. It took all of the strength they could dredge up in their tired muscles but they got the boat securely tied to a stranger's decking.

They lined up along the open side of the boat assessing a community of wooden buildings. Unlike us they had not built a protective wall around the village. Instead, they'd somehow acquired what Abe labelled 'chicken wire fencing'. Also, unlike ours, there was a large fancy stone building at the centre of the shacks. Louise recalled an archaic term: his lordship's mansion. Corin tried matching it to the map. 'The stone building is marked as Chevingly Park but there are only a few canvas shelters with it, on this map.'

Charlie found this encouraging, 'Their population must have grown and become more securely established.'

The perimeter of wire fencing marked out an area cleared of trees, well back from the river bank and with a wide grassy tract separating it from the surrounding forest. It seemed to be in good order.

Spirits fell though, when our small landing crew was greeted by a sickly-looking male and female calling themselves Ted and Pat. No hospitality was on offer and suspicion oozed from every pore. 'Unless you can give us fruit and vegetables you have nothing we're interested in trading,' Ted growled in response to Charlie's introduction.

Pat displayed despair rather than anger, which she added to with words, 'And if you're raiding there's bugger all for you to steal.'

The crew marched around their camp like an invading army. They had no defence. It was deeply shocking for our people to discover themselves in a far stronger position than those they'd hoped to get help from. The population there was very small and closer inspection suggested clear neglect could be illustrative of recent painful losses. Most telling of all was the absence of anyone younger than in their teens.

They'd been trapping in much the same way as we did but weakness had them neglecting the condition of their traps, which lay scattered haphazardly around the camp. More careless was the casting aside of weapons that had once been used for hunting. Maybe for defence too.

On seeing Charlie's contempt for their state of health, Ted's attitude appeared to suggest a sense of superior knowledge. It was Charlie he addressed, while the galleon's crew made open judgement of the man's poor leadership, 'The fishing here is good. You'll do well, if that's your mission.'

Charlie eyed the pale couple knowingly, 'Fish lack some key nutrients.' Pat's hackles rose, 'There's nothing for you to steal from our gardens and orchards. Nothing.'

Charlie's lip curled over Pat's accusation, 'We're traders, not thieves!' With something of his fears now out in the open, Ted wagged an angry hand around him, 'What do we have that you want?'

Charlie's lips formed with the intention of telling him 'nothing' but no sound emerged.

Only a few of the Chevingly Park people watched the crew returning to their river boat. Their expressions though, were marked. Charlie in particular, commented on the defeat he read in their faces, as the galleon moved away.

With nothing to gain from them and nothing to give, they set off upstream, towards the next place on the map. It wasn't until they were out of sight of Chevingly Park that they lowered the nets. They hadn't wanted to share their catch.

It was a healthy haul. A feast savoured by all. Clothes were pegged everywhere possible around the galleon, drying in the breeze. Thus fortified, the crew prepared to make good use of the remaining daylight.

Taking depth readings as they moved on, had them keeping to the central channel of the river. And as that narrowed the forest trees became noticeably bigger. Very much older. Those big, ancient deciduous trees grew amongst dense undergrowth. They began ticking off a list of animals we only saw rarely but that proliferated here: rhinos, zebras, a family of gorillas and definite sightings of tigers. The next settlement, according to the map, was in the midst of this. If anyone still lived there, they'd be very much tougher than the sickly inhabitants of Chevingly Park.

The crew, grateful to reach it just before dusk, found the pier in good condition. Clearly it was well used. It was also small. Only dugout canoes were tied there. Charlie deduced they didn't travel far, since overland, he believed, was not an option. That was of interest because Chevingly Park, though at some distance in the meandering river appeared relatively close by, if a route through the forest was possible.

Again, only a small group from the crew landed. They were obliged to take the rowers to the little dock.

As Charlie and the others scanned the land ahead along a well-trodden path through the dense forest, Abe looked back to the boat. He said that to anyone living there, it heralded the arrival of an immensely powerful colony.

Following that established route had any beasts fleeing. Clearly, they were wary of human hunters.

The initial signs of a settlement were apparent in broken stonework in the grass and shrubs. That evidence of man-made structure became more dominant as the trees thinned out, giving way to a large clearing where they had a stone fort. It was a tall and impressive fortification with giant wooden doors.

As Charlie hammered at the door he struggled now to think of what he could offer in trade, while the sounds of wild creatures drew closer.

A bearded man called from high on the battlements.
'I'll be buggered!' And he turned to call to those inside, 'Bloody strangers! What the hell?' He was joined by a number of others. It was an elderly woman who gathered her wits first. 'What do you want?' Charlie had one request only, by then. 'Let us in.'

She laughed. Her companions, one by one, joined her. But the door did open a fraction.

Charlie and Abe pushed their friends into safety, ahead of themselves. The moment the last man entered, the gate was slammed shut and everyone was frisked for weapons.

They looked healthy. But they were filthy. The entire place stank of sewage, engendering a new fear for the crew's health. A slow death, rather than being savaged by wild animals.

In spite of the insanitary conditions healthy children, babies even, were thriving. Charlie grinned a triumph I'd not have imagined him winning, had I been there. It gave all his people hope. It seemed to work like a charm on the old matriarch, who introduced herself with a girlish giggle, as Queen Shirley. Strange though her chosen title and childish manner seemed, it cast up no fear. Only a private sense of amusement.

Charlie gave an abridged, guarded account of his mission. The woman was not entirely warmly welcoming despite her naiveté but after a while she invited all from the galleon to visit her town and enjoy some good food while more serious negotiations could continue. She even sent

a set of her best warriors led by one called Trev, to escort them safely through the forest.

On the trek from the river to Kew, Zoe made a point of speaking to this leader of hunters. He was keen to display his exceptional gift in the making of bladed weapons. She also learned that no one in this town would be capable of stealing our galleon. Or that they'd want to.

In expressing her increasing loyalty to Charlie, Zoe privately shared all that she discovered about Trev as soon as they were alone. Including the fact he was potentially extremely dangerous. She sensed a psychological weakness in his reliance on Queen Shirley despite the fact he clearly made a greater direct impact on the good diet everyone living in Kew enjoyed. She found that besides hunting he protected the gatherers from the ever-present threat of the beasts of the forest. He even told her, without realising the importance of what he shared, that only Queen Shirley could bottle, pickle and smoke foods to keep them well-supplied throughout the winter. And significantly, that she refused to share that knowledge.

So, Charlie entered into talks with the strange old woman, knowing that contrary to her simple persona, she favoured a specific style of control. He'd picked up on an undercurrent amongst the perfectly intelligent, if unreasonable and lazy, people there, that they feared a future without her and believed she'd saved them from civil war and destruction, as well as starvation. On the whole, they avoided planning for the future.

Charlie kept that in mind when he settled down with Shirley and a glass of cider, following a fabulous banquet. Harry was his favoured fellow for negotiations normally, but Zoe's recent change of heart had him choosing her, a representative female, to accompany him. Shirley had only Trev with her, obviously there as a bodyguard rather than diplomat.

By all accounts, which were fewer than I wanted, Shirley was far from foolish. It emerged in time that she was an astute old bird. In spite of Charlie's honed poker face, she noticed Zoe's sideways concern. She realised they had a matter of some delicacy to raise. A potentially very big weakness for her to exploit. Yet she seemed more accommodating than they could have expected.

'OK, I'll come clean,' she giggled, glancing at Trev, who didn't get the joke. There was a show of embarrassed throat-clearing, 'Can you do plumbing?'

Charlie took his time. The stench told of their desperate need and he wanted to appear to occupy the high ground.

Finally, he told her quietly, 'We have expert plumbers.'

Now she smiled warm, less immature encouragement, 'You are going to have to tell me exactly what it is you want in return.'

Charlie sucked in fetid air, looking to Zoe more deeply than he'd previously imagined doing. The plan that came easily in theory now felt to be putting half his people at risk of something he might have little control over.

'Well?'

He cleared bile from his throat and let up a little, on his act of superiority.
'A number of our men are infertile.'

She was shocked. Genuinely. 'Why?'

'Oh,' Charlie sighed an old, oft-repeated sigh, 'we have theories. It has been a slow, relentless, generational process.'

She smiled a motherly smile, 'But not your women.'

He moistened dry lips with his tongue while Zoe shuffled uncomfortably.
'No. Not all of them.'

'Hmm.' Queen Shirley settled into deep ruminations.

Zoe peeped up nervously to check Charlie's thoughts and saw only a blank expression. He was a practised negotiator. She swallowed the desire to beg for a different way, entirely unaware she'd admitted to a more dire state of affairs than Charlie planned on doing.

Shirley hid her sense of triumph. Almost.

In time she made a tentative suggestion, 'I can persuade our men to oblige, if we can reach the right deal.'

Charlie had been preparing his offer since she enquired after their talents in the art of plumbing. 'I have good plumbers and strong labourers. You are in pitiful need of the hygiene our skills could provide.'

She made an attempt to appear less in need of help, 'It's not as bad as it looks at first sight. We have plans.' Now she tried to seem charitable, 'We have plans but I'm willing to allow that you might be more expert.'

Aware of the weakness of a falling population, she drove a hard bargain whilst admitting nothing of their total ignorance in matters of water supply and drainage. But an acceptable, if distasteful, deal was reached.

Initially, Sal assembled a small, expert team to examine a system they found to be literally falling apart. Her guide had nothing of use to offer, which surprised no one from Greenwich.

She soon developed a method which involved a clean-up operation as well as repairs. As her by then, large, team made rapid progress, Charlie couldn't fail to notice a level of hostility in the male occupants of Kew.

He took that concern to Shirley. 'If even one of our female volunteers is treated so much as unkindly by one of your men, we will sabotage all the work we've done for you.'

The guileless expression dropped off abruptly. 'Threats,' she breathed heavily.

'Take them seriously.'

He was entirely unprepared for what she had made ready. Two men grabbed him and dragged him off without explanation or any sign of receiving orders from Queen Shirley. Realising in an instant that this had to be pre-planned for any suggestion of withdrawing his cooperation, he fought, writhed and tried shouting warnings to his fellows. None the less he was thrown into a dungeon, which was, of course, a disgusting place. None of his questions were answered but he was now able to surmise much of the history of Kew that brought them to these appalling

conditions. Then, one by one, more male members of his crew were cast in with him.

Every time a new man was dragged in, Charlie attempted a different method to appeal to their captors. It was with Abe's advice that he moved on from threats to offers. The last one he tried negotiating with, was Trev.

'We can train your people to keep the system in good condition.'

'Why the hell would we do that when we've got slaves?'

'That won't help your next generation.'

'You really don't get it, do you?'

'Well,' obviously he was missing something, 'no.'

In the event, Charlie did not receive the explanation Trev itched to deliver because at that point the grill grated back and Harry was thrown in. When the fresh rising of voices died down, Charlie asked Harry the question he'd asked of each of the others. 'Have you seen Zoe or Louise?'

He shook his head but offered, 'Managed a few words with Sal.'

Something pained him. Probably being dragged away from his partner.

'Tell me.'

'They're all OK. They want them in good condition,' he growled.

Charlie waited uncomfortably.

'They're locked up but not like this. In a clean room.'

'What? Why?'

'It looks like most of their women can't carry...'

'Bloody hell!'

'Yeah. If they'd worked with us, we could have helped each other.'

'Fools,' Charlie spat, thumping the grill.

'Yeah. We need a plan.'

'We didn't finish the work.'

'And they'll want that done.'

'At least.' Charlie growled impotently, 'Trev called us *slaves*.'

'OK. Sabotage or strike?'

'Start with refusing to work.'

'They'll probably starve us.'

'Go straight for the sabotage?'

'They'll need us to fix it. Then we negotiate.'

'Let's try that.'

'Yeah.'

It seems they didn't surprise Queen Shirley with that one. She only had three out at a time. Charlie and Harry managed to get themselves in a group together, with Corin. No one from Kew had any comprehension of their work. They were entirely unprepared for the river of sewage cascading through the main thoroughfare. However, they were prepared for a protest of some kind. Anticipated it with glee, in fact.

Corin was the one picked because no doubt they realised he was the least skilled, as far as their needs were concerned. A smaller loss in Shirley's grand scheme. To cut it short, the man my sister loved was sent

outside the wall to be savaged by wolves. Charlie and Harry were forced to watch.

They tried one more time and lost another man through the withholding of labour. Tempers were lost and two more died trying to fight their way out.

A month passed in that way, with Trev adding to their misery by pointing out their powerlessness for protecting their women. He tortured them with tales of how many, along with descriptions of individuals, he personally had inseminated.

I had Zoe's personally delivered report on the suffering of our women during that time. Those on the crew who were unable to conceive, were left untouched. That had more to do with Shirley's focus in her orders than any decency in the men.

Having been familiar with Harry's tender touch, Sal was pretty much destroyed mentally and emotionally, in the first few days. She didn't suffer the worst of it though. The one Louise was 'assigned' to either relished hurting women, or the 'impotence' Shirley engendered in him caused him to find an expression of potency in raping my sister. Zoe heard men calling to him through the roughly draped curtains of the bed when Louise cried out in pain, screamed threats, and begged. They were angry with him only because he was supposed to be creating a healthy baby, not ruining future chances of repeating the process.

None were gentle. They had no desire to be sires. Only a few took pleasure from this latest of Queen Shirley's assignments. Our women were restricted to one room with three beds that were in almost constant use during the day. They were given good fresh food but with no means of washing and only buckets for toilets, their health slowly deteriorated through the ignorance and laziness of the men holding them captive.

The bars of the windows that were on one side of the room only, did not afford a view of the living area. Instead, they looked out on to the forest, where dissident men from Greenwich were thrown to the wolves.

Then, finally, one day when Charlie and his two work mates were being shoved back to the cell, they, at first, seemed to hear a tempest blowing up. There was roaring and screeching but no signs of swirling winds. And rather than veering in from the river, it closed in on all sides of the wall. In moments, they discerned voices in that awful cacophony: roaring, shouting, howling, wailing, crying and bellowing. It was a while before they realised this wasn't a mass attack of forest beasts. We'd known that here in Greenwich with troops of monkeys and even chimps.

Minutes later the men of Kew who were rising to the ramparts, were falling back down as grey bodies began cascading over the battlements. In that clamour there was sub-human snarling and growling like wild dogs with snapping teeth. We'd had a fad of reading zombie stories at Greenwich, and apparently that is what Charlie believed was attacking Kew. A herd of the undead.

But for some reason our own people were not under attack. Within minutes it was the men of Kew, and the invaders, who fell upon

one another, fighting violently and falling moaning and groaning to the ground.

In time, Charlie and Harry could make out voices they recognised: our men shouting from the dungeon and our women locked in their room, screaming. Together they beat Trev into the general melee whilst filching his keys off him. They released our men with scant warning of what was taking place before moving on to check the women.

I'm told it was when our men and women were released that the altercation turned even more violent. They had greater strength than the people who only then were recognised as having trekked overland from Chevingly Park.

Amazingly, it was those sickly people who made certain to kill Queen Shirley and Trev. Repeated, horrific treatment at the hands of Trev's fans, on the orders of Shirley, had cultivated in them a festering loathing. On their journey through the woodland path made by Trev, they'd kept the wolves at bay. Now these ravening creatures circled Kew, howling for their next kill. They were as satisfied when it was Trev and Queen Shirley being flung from the parapet as they had been when it was our men, or prisoners taken from Chevingly.

By the end of the battle the tortured victims of Shirley had reduced the population of the Kew settlement so comprehensively that the poor people of Chevingly could join forces with a few of ours, to rule Kew, while Harry, Zoe and some representatives from Chevingly returned here to make their report.

I discovered that their sickness was a result of Kew raiding parties sent by Shirley and led by Trev to pick clean their well-tended gardens and orchards. It seems they'd once traded with Kew. That was until the plumbers of Kew formed a union and Shirley turned the rest of the population against them, claiming they were 'traitors holding everyone to ransom'. She made people believe that the hunters and gatherers would follow suit. As they were led by Trev that was never going to happen. Shirley further cultivated Trev's loyalty by encouraging the expression of his sadistic nature. And she channelled it. She had him directing his violence at the people of Chevingly, thus making her own people who witnessed that, want to support, rather than defy, or even upset, him.

Most telling of the mercy and courage of our new friends, was the decision to attack Kew only when they saw our galleon continuing up river. They spent weeks making preparations for a mission entirely designed out of altruistic motives and very little skill or experience. They went there to rescue Charlie and our people. They knew the danger my brother and sister were heading into and, weak though they were, Pat and Ted had little difficulty persuading their entire population to go to their aid when their scouts failed to see our galleon returning down the river. They faced the beasts of the forest that normally terrified them. And we love them for it. Truly love them.

Now we work together, making good use of the galleon. This is less about trade and more about sharing and cooperation. We help in

their orchards, our women who suffered are cared for by their nurses. Some have made their homes in Greenwich. We both have strong members of our communities living in Kew. Charlie rules there, with Zoe. They're tough. They have to be. And I rule here in Greenwich, jointly with Jody. In time we'll get democratic systems going. Most of all, best of all, we will begin restoring the human population.

Sun and Moon

Some flash fiction.

Four Blue Moons stretched one cramped tentacle whilst rubbing her tired eyes with another.

'I have found a planet in this solar system containing a world with a suitable atmosphere.'

'And I suppose it's occupied.'

'Not all animal life on it, is sentient. We probably could find an isolated area...'

Her voice trailed away. Had they become so desperate now? Moons' eyes brushed past her partner's fearful gaze. Last time they tried that they barely got away with their lives.

'How technologically advanced is it?'

'There are artificial satellites but no regular space travel, so at least they're isolated from any federation.'

Large Red Sun sighed, 'Obviously they are intelligent beings, but I doubt we'll have much in common with them.'

Moons' deep sapphire eyes glowed with moisture as she whispered, 'Hiding.'

Sun's fiery gaze met those pools of his love, 'But together.'

Walker's Incinerator

This story has a loose connection to The Vinctalin Legacy series.

So engrossed was I, at the top of the stepladder, chiselling the nose of the mayor, that I didn't even hear the car until it was inside the yard. The steps teetered as I swung around in response to it screeching to a halt. There was one customer in particular I might have expected to arrive dramatically at dawn. But this was not the Baron. Instead, I was shocked to be staring at Becky's car. My wife never drove like that.

Descending the eight steps of the ladder became a precarious task, shaking as I was from a sense of impending doom.

Becky almost fell from the car, leaving the door wide and screaming. She was crying out in a level of anguish I'd never seen before.

I stumbled over to pull her into my arms, holding on to her fiercely, desperately not wanting to hear that one of our children had been hurt. Or worse.

I couldn't think of the worse. I would not think of a possible worst-case scenario than chasing after an ambulance to be by my child's bedside.

Yet I could not, not ask. Naturally, I had to know.
'Which one?'

She clung on tighter, her wild howling turning to heaving, wracked wailing.
'Jenny?'

I felt her desperately nodding into my neck.
'We need to get to the hospital.' I couldn't budge her. That is, I could have been brutal but I was not that kind of man then. 'It's worse than that?' Her crying had subsided into strangulated sobbing. Again, she nodded furiously into my neck.

I shakily pulled in as much air as I could manage. 'She can't be...' Becky pushed away from me, her feeble, trembling arms making little distance and her face not raised to mine. I could just make out the words in her hushed, rasping, stammering detachment.

'They're both gone.'

'Where?'

She tried punching my chest. It was a poor effort.

'When?'

The slaps grew a little heavier, though the voice didn't. That was a whisper I could hardly hear but could not mistake no matter how much I wanted to. 'Dead.'

'No! No, that can't be right. Did you call an ambulance? What did your parents say?'

'All of them, Julius. They're all gone.' She angrily clarified, 'Dead and gone.'

I caught myself shaking her in a manner that should have had her crying out in pain, and stopped abruptly. Only then did I accept she was in shock and I must take control for both of us. For all of us.

Now careful to hold her shoulders without hurting her, I pushed my face close to hers, 'Listen, Becks. Listen to me.'

She tried, unsuccessfully, to meet my eyes.

'Is there a medic there?'

Now she looked to my face, furious with my denial. She wiped at her eyes with fumbling hands, made a valiant effort to steady her voice and got the message out. 'I went to pick them up. They were all still in their beds.

They were cold, Julius. They'd been that way for hours.'

I had to take stock. Try to see the big picture. This was unlike Becky. I'd seen her panic mildly when we missed an important flight and I'd seen her irate but controlled and ready for a legal fight, when Walker pushed through planning permission for the construction of a waste incinerator not far from my in-laws home.

That reminder had me swearing. It was then, one of the few things that could reduce me to what I always regarded as vacuous vocabulary.

Now it was me shaking in fear. 'Did you check their air-quality monitor?' 'In the red.' Her voice broke over that damning evidence.

I helped Becky into the passenger seat of her car whilst desperately issuing orders, 'I'll drive. You call the ambulance.'

Her anger resurfaced in a surge, 'Don't you think I've already tried! There's no signal anywhere! Even Mum's house phone doesn't get an answer.'

I pictured chaotic misdialling and swallowed the need to tell her this. That image though, gave me hope that she was wrong about the entire scenario and with that I simply tried not to think at all anymore.

A half hour drive through the woods and then fenland was too much time for a mind in turmoil. One that was conjuring up figures I'd studied concerning fallout from a misused waste incinerator.

I pushed away useless negative concepts by working at hope. 'That metre could have been broken.'

'You know what happened as well as I do.'

'No. I would not let the children stay there if I believed it was that dangerous.'

'But you said, told the entire county in fact, fought a campaign because of the danger...'

'To health!'

'Watch the road!'

I straightened the car after taking the bend too wide, swore at the unknown driver who'd abandoned his car in a country lane and tried to draw in air. My thinking was that I'd kill Walker if they were unconscious. If there had been any damage of the kind I'd studied, to their organs, 'Or any other kind,' I growled cryptically. 'The greedy bastard!' I then

descended into extreme stupidity, 'This time we'll *make* your parents move. We'll find a way to cover the lost value...'

Becky fell into the dashboard, screwing her face into her fists there, breathing heavily and erratically.

I missed a badly parked post van by inches, too angry to analyse why he'd stopped in the fenland miles from any houses or even shelter for relieving himself, as well as an overturned saloon car in a ditch and a white delivery van that had stopped a foot into the road while reversing. I could see the driver slumped inside. Probably old enough for a heart attack. He might still be alive but I couldn't, wouldn't, stop to help.

It was still very early and no surprise to find Lou and Mandy's house quiet. Almost any other time of day you'd find Lou either pottering in the garden or on the bench drinking tea or reading. All my reasoning was of no comfort. In fact, I'd begun hoping the incinerator had poisoned the air I was stepping into because I wanted to be punished for allowing my children to stay with their grandparents after all the warnings I'd given.

The front door was wide open. The thought floated across my mind of how vulnerable that rendered the occupiers. Chasing that notion away was the realisation that Becks must have left in a state of panic which pushed concerns of security not just down the list but off the bottom.

Neither of us could walk straight but a desperate hope kept me strong enough to hold Becky upright. I could see before entering that Mandy's kitchen was as neat as ever, and empty. Breakfast should be on the table. Becks had arranged to join them for an early breakfast. Her shaky intake of air told me this was the second time she'd faced that realisation.

She wouldn't be moved to the rooms beyond. Not yet. I passed her parents closed bedroom door to make straight for the steep stairs leading to the loft they'd had converted specifically for our two daughters to stay in.

Jenny, our firstborn, the too-daring one, was snuggled in bed on her side, her back to me. I could see only Sammy's blonde hair above the duvet in her bed.

I went first to Jenny, carefully rounding the foot of the bed, so she'd see my face on waking and not be frightened. Were her lips tinged blue?

I knelt, reaching out to her shoulder. She didn't stir. I drew back the quilt to turn her on to her back. Gently. Lovingly. As when she was a new baby.

Her head fell to the side. Some kind of sound emerged from deep within me. It was some time before I realised its origin. I could only think then, to get her to the car; to the hospital.

But there was no pulse.

Jenny was the older one. The stronger one. Only the faintest possibility of Sammy's survival had me repeating the process with my eight year-old. That same discovery had me broken.

I have no idea how long I stumbled from one to the other crying out disbelieving anguish whilst rechecking their vital signs. I had both of them on the floor by the time Becky roused me. She fell to her knees, keening pitifully, helplessly, joining a group hug that had only two pairs of grasping arms.

She came around before I did.

'Do you want to see Mum and Dad before we go to the police?'

'Police?'

'It's a criminal act. Walker...'

'Fucking Walker!' There was not much energy in my voice but a weight of loathing dragged on my heart.

'We have to...'

'I'll kill him!'

I'd scared her. 'No! Jules. I won't lose you too. I won't let Walker do that to me!'

But I was beyond reason. When I sprang into life, fuelled by hatred, I'd not have waited for Becky to get into the car if she wasn't already halfway in when I started the engine.

'What are you going to do?'

Kill the bastard! Aloud, I said only, 'Punch his lights out.'

'I can't get through this without you...'

'Get through this?' The car careened dangerously along the narrow lanes, squealing and spinning around a few more badly-parked vehicles. 'We can't live with this! That murdering bastard's killed us all and I'll see him in hell!'

Becky had no fight left in her. She braced herself as well as she could in the seat, got knocked around badly by my dangerous driving, and cried as one utterly lost.

Walker's house, his new house, situated well away from the noxious fumes of his money-spinning incinerator, in a clearing in the woods not far from the studio and yard where I'd been sculpting the mayor, was not quiet. It was jolly. He was laughing and breakfasting with his wife on the side patio.

The ghost of their smiles had faded by the time I leapt from the slowly rolling car without its hand break engaged.

'Murdering piece of shit!' I screamed, reeling towards him with my fists balled.

His wife's chair scraped back on the flagstones as she cried out, trying to escape my path.

She was too slow. I shoved her out of my way to get to the piece of filth I could think only as far as seeing as still as my children. Only in the back of my mind did it register that I'd knocked the woman off her feet and that Becky was running to her while yelling at me to stop.

Walker, coward, tried to run for it. He made one step only before I caught his arm, swung him around and landed the heaviest punch of my life smack in the middle of his face. Blood spurted as he dropped on his

back. I was bending in preparation to beat him to a pulp when Becky caught my other arm.

'Stop!'

I wrestled out of her grip.

'Julius!' Her piercing voice broke through the madness, 'Look!'

It was through misty eyes that the result of my insane actions made their first steps into clarity. Blood was pooling around Walker's head. It wasn't from the shattered nose but from the back of his skull, where he'd hit the stone slabs. That was a reminder of his wife's fall. Becky, both hands clasped tight over her mouth, followed the turn of my head. Mrs. Walker lay on her side but with even more blood seeping across the paving.

'Oh God.' I fell to my knees. That wasn't remorse. Nothing like it. It was a realisation that dead is dead and I'd never hear my girls laugh again. Or cry.

Knowing that only on some obscure level, I found myself running back to the car. I was almost back at her parents' place before I realised I'd left Becky behind.

This time it was with a shadow of reverence that I entered their home whilst recalling Becky's whispered statement about calling the police from the Walker's phone. And this time I silently pushed the door wide in the downstairs bedroom. Oh, they were definitely gone from this world. Fresh tears reminded me that I'd been fond of them.

Those tears continued to flow as I dragged my weighted limbs up the narrow steps to my children. But I didn't enter. What could I do? Nothing for them. They'd be in their favourite frocks and in their small coffins soon enough. But I had a duty of a different kind I must see to before the police caught up with me.

My son, fruit of my loins from a short-lived, passionate affair, at university, had loved his half-sisters. He was not the kind of sixteen-year-old to be annoyed by young girls. He had adored being a big brother from the moment each of them came into the world. And in my heart I knew I'd served him badly as a father by what I'd done to the Walkers. Images flashed through my mind of Jack being confronted by the aftermath, as the son of a murderer.

It was then that I knew Becky had not misdialed or been clumsy with her iPhone. The house phone was dead. My mobile had no signal. There'd be no confessional phone call to Jack. No agonising over how much to tell before I tried to drive the ninety miles to explain in person.

This time I had more control of myself as I climbed into the car and tried to set the satnav, which I found, also received no signal. 'But that's satellite,' I grumbled, 'not aerial. It's ridiculous.' I started the engine, promising myself I could remember which signposts to follow and cursing Becky for never keeping a road atlas, even in the boot.

I took a route beginning with a road that passed the dirt track heading to the Walkers' house. Still feeling no regret whatsoever over their deaths but half expecting to find Becky walking home, I slotted the

car into a footpath in the trees. I couldn't take a chance the police had somehow discovered my crime and were bent on catching me before I'd explained to Jack, in private.

I was lost in thought when I heard an odd, airy, possibly mechanical sound. The action I glimpsed emerging from the Walkers' track, wouldn't register. So much so that I didn't react to seeing Becky. In fact, I held back, analysing a surreal scene. I did not recognise the vehicle with no wheels hovering above the tarmacked surface as it turned into the road and moved slowly away from me in the direction I'd been heading. It had a flat back. And was laden with bodies. Human bodies.

I recognised the Walkers on top of about eight others. Becky walked behind. Dazed. She seemed to have joined a group who were on foot. People I knew to have been staying in lodges in the woods. Lodges owned and rented out by Hetty and Glenn Peterson, walked close to Becky.

All of that was not the most incomprehensible part of the scene. That honour went to the people in charge. The ones wearing red jumpsuits and waving batons threateningly. I was in the process of straining to devise a plan to get Becky away from there when Glenn tried to make a break for it. What I then realised to be a member of a group taking them prisoner, moved swiftly, before my friend had taken two steps, and jabbed him with the business end of the rod. As Glenn hit the hard ground others walking were threatened with the same treatment if they tried to stop to check on him.

The slow procession moved steadily on. Glenn's body was picked up by two of the strangers and tossed on the top of the pile of bodies on that unidentified vehicle.

I knew. It was obvious. I'd not be able to rescue my wife. Not without help on a large scale. And with communications disrupted I could only guess how the police had their resources overstretched. A number of people around here had shotguns. Concepts of a local militia forming in my mind, gave me a mad sense of hope.

Moving within the trees only, I followed them, hiding every time the crack of a twig caught their attention. When they stopped at Gloria Anderson's house by the road's edge, I fell behind a thick trunk, breathing so heavily I feared they'd hear me.

One red-clad man remained at a distance from the group. I could see the back of his head turning to either side only occasionally. He was not expecting any kind of attack or resistance. I could just see Becky's hair, with most of her concealed behind other prisoners still on their feet, guarded by six of whoever they were. Four of them marched straight into Gloria's house.

They wanted bodies. Only bodies. They hadn't spent any time looking for valuables. They emerged in twos, each pair carrying a body to fling on to the pile of bodies already gathered. I recognised Gloria and her husband, then their son-in-law was taken and finally the small bodies of her grandchildren.

What could I do? One man alone? One father of one surviving child who would need him no matter what this meant.

A woman in the alien uniform now bringing up the rear of the slowly moving procession, looked around when I moved in the dead undergrowth. I couldn't fight them. Hell, I doubted I could even beat her on her own. I was reduced to hoping and praying she wouldn't come investigating. Thus, I felt overwhelming relief and guilt, when she turned back to her task in hand and my wife continued plodding towards a fate I couldn't begin, at that stage, to imagine.

Adrenalin pumped for longer than I'd known was possible. I did not slump from acknowledging that narrow escape but remained alert. Planning.

I allowed enough time and distance to be able to get back to my car without drawing attention. I waited in it until I judged the engine noise would not be heard by them, and then set off on a different route to my son.

Only on that journey did I realise this was a nationwide invasion. As I passed herds of cattle and flocks of sheep dead in the pastures, wove around motorway pileups with some areas cleared of bodies and investigated hotels with all inside asleep for eternity did a distant part of my mind begin guessing at Russia, North Korea and rogue states in the middle east. I had begun analysing more closely the possibility of Arabic nations and terrorists because of the golden complexion of the invaders by the time I'd mustered some real hope of Jack's survival. I, my wife and the Walkers had been in the same isolated area in the night. Jack was in a camp in the mountains. If chemical bombs had been dropped, which was likely, they had a limited range of effect.

I was in the process of recalling news programs identifying groups using such weapons when I saw the first convoy. I know I was spotted before I pulled the car in behind a derelict building but they didn't come for me. This was much bigger than the gruesome parade my wife had been forced to join. I estimated twenty people of all ages walking behind three of those flat-bedded, hovering vehicles, piled high with more bodies than I could guess at. All prisoners were compliant. No doubt they'd learned that lesson. But their guards? I couldn't begin to think who could create such a vast army and doomsday weapons with no hint of it reaching the intelligence agencies. The logic following on from that was that they did know. They just didn't see fit to warn the public.

I had some difficulty in the mountain roads but only in refuelling the car and in tracking down the exact location of the camp. In fact, I heard it before I saw it. It was swarming with far more people than had been staying in it. Most were dazed, many were crying, some were fiercely embracing reluctant sons and a number were shouting orders and warnings. The boys and their teachers could make no sense of any of it.

I joined the fray, pushing carelessly through people with no concern for mothers and sisters, as I had Mrs. Walker.

Jack found me. When my strength gave way for seeing him alive, he dragged me out of the melee. He had no need to speak. His face asked every question that mattered.

'It's an invasion of some kind. The girls are...'

'No,' he was shaking his head.

'Becky was OK last time I saw her.'

He grabbed my shoulder, unable to prioritise all the questions in his head. Needing me to do that for him.

'OK.' I heaved in air. It was a better effort than I'd managed since my wife came careening into the yard. 'The girls were with Becky's parents.

They're all...'

I couldn't say it. I didn't have to. He'd heard enough in the ranting and weeping of those who arrived here before me. He was trying to deny it. And crying.

'Becky has been taken prisoner.' I made my voice produce enough clarity to get the facts across but it was a broken effort.

He began sobbing and gulping as reality seeped in.

'Whoever they are, they're collecting the bodies.'

'What?' His tears stopped abruptly. 'What the hell?'

I continued fighting for control. I had my son and we would get my wife back, somehow. Hatred and revenge could wait.

'We have to get out of here. They know where the survivors will...'

'Survivors?'

'A night-time chemical attack.'

'Chemicals? Who?'

'Get your tent down and load it into the car. I'll get whatever supplies I can...'

'Stealing food? What about my friends here, Dad?'

'We can't move in groups. Be quick. We'll go further up the mountains.

They don't care about the odd one or two escaping.' That's how it seemed, anyway.

'Dad, this is...'

'I know, Jack. Let's just get clear. Then we can think.'

He pulled back on my arm, 'What about Mum?'

She hadn't crossed my mind. 'We have to get away. We'll find her when it quietens down.'

He didn't state the obvious. Nor did he object. Instead, he allowed me to push him on ahead of me.

I was not alone in my scheming. However, the common enemy provided us with cooperation. It was with tacit agreement that we each took only a share of the camp's stores and quietly headed for our cars.

Their arrival was equally quiet and efficient. They appeared from the trees, approaching from all sides. I noted, with shameful resignation, the single hovering vehicle not yet burdened with non-compliant survivors. Ignoring my son's resistance to my common sense, as some innocent people prepared to fight, I pushed him to the side.

More than twenty boys and ten adults were laid out before the rest knew they were conquered. And I did not hesitate to follow gestured instructions to load those bodies on to the waiting flat bed of a vehicle that would rise up and float ahead of those of us left walking. That was far fewer than the ones felled.

I trundled along, bent and defeated, guilty of the murder of two innocent people as well as the failure to care as much for my wrongdoing, as for my loss.

Giant Congo Rats

Here is a tale inspired by Following Meltdown, which is set in a chilling, dystopian future. In the book a multiple narrative style was employed, giving special insight into each rich and vivid character, whilst exploring more deeply their conflicting psyches.

This story, of necessity, can be only a small taste of that technique. Should you read Following Meltdown we, as with all authors, would love to know your opinion of it. Honest ratings and reviews on Amazon are particularly welcome.

Yvette

What's left of the town's population has been drawn together in a variety of allocated venues. The town Council consists of survivors from the old order, along with two or three others of similar character more interested in personal power than responsibility.

One thing was made very clear in the 'invitation': the country is under martial law. Only those here will receive food vouchers.

The carrot of the food vouchers is being kept dangling while the puffed-up, well-fed Council chairman addresses us, the hungry survivors. This is about making everyone left, useful to them.

'This is the list of jobs that have become superfluous in current conditions.' He proceeds to reel off a number of professions, including mine, 'Vets, priests, any of the arts, cooks...' I'm not hearing more as I realise he includes chefs in that category. 'Anyone once engaged in such work will have a specific job allocated to them. Kindly give your name at the desk. Anyone falling into this group will receive instructions for work along with your food vouchers.'

He thinks there is no need to explain but no one is moving towards the desks by the exit.

'What about the handicapped who couldn't get here?' I recognise Jo Warner. He's been asking around for a wheelchair for his mother.

'All in good time.'

'No!' Warner is trembling with anger, frustration, and fear no doubt. He tries to soften his plea, 'My mother is hungry; starving...'

He is being drowned out by other voices: *You fat pig. You're not telling me..., You fools were elected before the last plague..., This is fucking blackmail!*

People are pressing forward but the Council are prepared for that. Armed soldiers are inserting themselves between the retreating Council and the crowd. While they fire over our heads, peppering desperate people with fragments of wood and plaster, some of us hope that by being at the head of the queues at the tables we'll get a little bit more of something, choice maybe, than the rebels. I'm aware of the divide and rule aspect of this.

The person ahead of me now is being told that his legal profession is now irrelevant. He is to be a teacher. The one to my left is allocated a position in the police. He's trying to argue that forty years of banking is no preparation for that.

The soldier responds with a patience that will quickly wane, 'We'll be dealing with any serious unrest. Your post is more administrative.'

I realise that those jobs are about keeping a desperate population occupied and controlled. Children neatly in school and adults monitored by police.

I'm thinking that a teaching job could be made into something useful, enjoyable even, when I reach the desk. As a chef I can teach nutrition. I have a good grounding in biology. This might not be too bad. I give my name, 'Yvette Chambers.'

'He looks down the list. 'Hygiene.'

I picture teaching hygiene to teenagers.

'Yes,' he's ticking off my name, 'there are five of you. This is your zone.'

He leafs through a file before passing a map and instructions.

'But this is...'

'And your vouchers for the week. Don't lose any.'

'But there are....'

'Next!' He's irritated. He hates this job.

Someone I recognise by sight only, barges me out of the way.

'Hold on!'

He shoves me roughly, 'My children are home on their own and you're holding us all up!'

'Yes but...'

A soldier who has been standing back from the mob and shouting orders, calls to me, 'Get moving! Now!'

He's trying to avoid a riot. He might even manage it. I won't be here to know. To get caught up in it.'

I slot the vouchers past the buttons of my blouse, into the security of my bra, and fold the envelope of instructions into my jeans pocket.

This is surreal, this walk from a one-time church hall to my house. Every step brings memories. In this row of semis there are many empty houses now. Five doors away from mine there's a surviving elderly man. I didn't see him in the hall. In the next, Mrs. Laver once lived with her husband and three children. I know her family died but I don't know what became of her. Next is Tabitha's. She was in the hall with her father and mother. And now I dread entering my own lonely, empty house. But staying on the street is potentially more dangerous.

I'm careful with the unlocking as well as the re-locking of my home. Someone might be waiting to bowl me into my house with a view to taking everything I have so carefully saved. More than that, I now have food vouchers. That could incite further reasons for attack than mere brutality.

Now, certain of my elaborate security system, I study my new job role with the best frame of mind I can muster. I can only hope the other

four hygiene operatives will be as thorough as I plan to be, even though they'll feel at least as insulted as I do.

This post brings with it probably more autonomy than a teacher's. It also brings filth, disgusting people and army summons at times. And the sewage system which has been backed-up for years. If I think my toilet stinks, I can be pretty certain of the stench, along with the possibility of infection heralded by it, that I'll be enduring on a daily basis.

Tabitha

I've been observing Yvette for a year. Since that meeting in the church hall where we were all allocated jobs and food vouchers. She walks past my classroom window several times every day, pulling her foul cart of drain rods, shovels, brooms and buckets. Dad died. I realised too late he was giving most of his food to Mum. I'm rake thin. But Yvette is still strong. I've decided to ask her what her secret is, this morning.

Here she is. My class will go nuts, but in any case, I rush out of the school to confront her.

'How are you getting extra food!'

She tried to side-step me and my blatant anger.

'We're desperate for food, Yvette.'

She drops the handles of the heavy cart. 'I know. We all are.'

'You never look hungry.'

She knows what I'm asking. And prepares to move on. I put out a hand to stop her. Guilt is clear in her features.

A thought shocks me. 'Are you stealing from our rations?'

'No!'

'Then how?' I cry in desperation.

She's thinking. Probably inventing a story. But her answer is convincing.

'I trap game in the woods.'

'Teach us how to do that! Please!'

She's fearful. 'I'll get you some.'

'How soon?' I whisper, willing now to keep a secret I might benefit from.

'Tomorrow. I'll bring it round.'

I picture venison steaks and expect, perhaps, a rabbit. And I have an image of a smile on Mum's face as she eats it all.

Yvette

I've skinned and diced the meat of five rats for Tabitha.

As I hand it to her I tell her it's rabbit, adding with genuine gravity, 'You must cook it well.'

She nods absently.

'Seriously. Overcook it if anything. It might be tough, especially with how our teeth are now but this is very important. We don't know how the plagues might have affected the wildlife.'

A week later

Tabitha and her mother are dying. The Giant Congo Rats I catch in the sewers still carry the plague. I'm supposed to kill and burn them, but I know how to cook them to make the meat safe. She must have been too impatient. Now the children in school have caught it. Their families will get it. Then neighbours. Including me.

Tendanny

We're all familiar with the underclass being misjudged by their 'bettters'. In this next story that concept is turned on its head. Here, the reader might ask: in what way has Shella misinterpreted her one-time superior's motivations? Is her judgement of him as prejudiced as his had once been of her? And what has he discovered since his demotion?

I am trying to remain alert. It is awareness of my level of hunger and lack of oxygen that tell me we are due to make landfall soon. There have been no provisions since the last light cycle and this cycle of darkness is far longer than is normal in the rhythm of life here in this crowded central bay, deep in the bowels of the ship.

Suddenly the huge, packed area, is flooded with light so bright it agonises our eyes. All hands fly to protect sight. Without it we are worthless.

When, finally, I can look around, like everyone else here trying not to vomit from the stench of a seemingly eternal voyage, my gaze rests on Tyzon. I am not alone in this. We are calculating our chances. Many look to the crew leader they hope to toil under while just as many look to the one they fear.

Silto has manoeuvred himself to be close to Tyzon. Silto is stupid. It is by pure luck that he has survived the three cullings that have taken place since we were born in the breeding cycle of twenty-five years ago. He calls Tyzon by her full name. The name she enjoyed before being demoted from the First Echelon Guard: Tyzon Eno. Silto hopes to be picked by Tyzon, for her crew. Silto might even have ambitions of becoming Tyzon's mate and as such be certain of surviving the next culling. At the very least he dreams of the powerful, bio-engineered Guard affording some protection should the Tajats of this world we're approaching, be violent.

I can feel the first bumps of an entry into an atmosphere. The young Tendanny next to me, lacking my experience, is slow in trying to grip the only handhold between us. I'd been concealing it with my knee, having nudged my way into this bit of the floor following the last food break. At that first tremor, I reached under my knee and grabbed the handle. I will now try to help the girl. If she is broken, she'll be culled before the harvest even begins.

As the rocking and rolling becomes more pronounced she clings more tightly to me. Shouting above the noise of machinery echoing through our chamber and the cries of young Tendanny, I command her to keep low. To spread her weight.

We have finally settled. There are some injuries but not in people I know. Tyzon hasn't even broken sweat, though she has broken a young, frightened, non-enhanced boy trying to steady himself against her.

She is angry. She will be leading a crew of very dirty Tendanny, collecting stinking corpses, slaves and anything else useful here, while other Guards who'd kept their positions, give her orders. And laugh at her.

Then, of course, there's the other demoted Guard amongst us: Jasig. He has not cast his emerald glare nor tossed his head, flashing the gems embedded in his brow, as Tyzon has done. He hasn't even voiced anger and frustration. He has queued with us at feeding times, not pushing to the front as Tyzon has done.

If he is psychologically weak, I do not want to be picked for his crew. Weakness brings more chances of death than Tyzon's aggravation might. It could bring attention from Guards who, having been forced to report little progress due to his poor leadership, take their revenge on his crew. That would not be an easy death. It would be the vicious torture of Guards obliged to take on the filthy work of the Tendanny.

I don't poxin believe it! There are five Tendanny leaders, yet having been spared Tyzon's selection, I am now chosen by Jasig. Why the poxin rhani did that dim Guard pick me! He could hardly poxin see me, hidden as I was behind other Tendanny. Unlike my younger fellows pushing to the front, eager for fresh air no matter what else was out there, I'd hung back so I'd be left for one of the Tendanny leader's crews.

Jasig points and calls me by name. He knows my name! Oh, what kind of poxin krantiva dung am I being selected for here?
'Shella. You will drive.'

What! What? Jasig should drive. Tyzon certainly will. The driver is the only one spared from entering the festering Tajat dwellings and grabbing hold of what could well be contagiously diseased corpses. Does he know something I don't?

Analysis and scheming are pointless. I follow immediately behind Jasig; ahead of the remainder of his large Tendanny team. I'm picturing him in his more comfortable, looser-fitting, Second Echelon Guard uniform. He has a wonderful physique. I have seen that in demoted Guards before. Their physiques don't last once they no longer benefit from the rinjinjin. Tyzon too, will go that way. One day she will catch her reflection and lose her temper. We can only hope that time does not occur while we're travelling the cosmos, in our squalid hold, corralled and vulnerable to her attack.

But Jasig? Who can tell what his reaction will be? Ah well, I doubt I'll survive the coming culling so why would I worry? In fact, why don't I disobey him or 'make a mistake' and get killed by him? Get it over with. That could well be better than catching a poxin disease from the foul Tajats bodies I'm about to be driving to the incinerators.

Stinking dung! I've never before served on a landing craft that's settled so close to the rhani dwellings of the stinking Tajats! I won't even get a decent length journey on the empty flat-back after delivering the bodies for incineration. This means more time spent in the malodorous poxin atmosphere of mouldering poxin corpses.

Jasig has us lined up and moving across the sandy terrain to a small cluster of buildings the First Echelon Guard has, as yet, not allocated. That Guard is grinning at this ex-Guard, Jasig. He poxin knows

what's in there and his cruel game with Jasig could well kill me. Poxin Guard dung!

Jasig benignly waves for this large team to follow at a slow walking pace. The First Echelon Guard's expression reveals that he takes that as a challenge. Jasig will see us all collapsing in this heat but that Guard won't. He won't waste time out here, taking revenge. There are safer places for that.

As the rest of the team begin breaking into these Tajat-made structures I hang back as far as I can get away with. Jasig knows what I'm doing but says nothing as he aims for the first broken doorway. Tendanny are trying to carry bodies, one between two as usual, but with one hand holding their mouths and noses, trying not to vomit. If they weren't infected prior to the gassing, they will be poxin thick with bacteria by now, in this climate.

Jasig emerges from his inspection of the building, as placid as ever. No doubt his bio-engineering is still operating well enough to spare him immediate suffering, if not long term.

He strolls over to me, passing the nearest, fumbling body carriers and speaks quietly, for my ears only. 'Turn the vehicle and reverse to the ship.'

What a ridiculously awkward poxin manoeuvre this is going to be! I say, 'Yes, Sir.'

His eyes are on me as he steps back, giving me room to turn the flat-bed.

Had Jasig not been standing close I'd have accusing looks from the two Tendanny tossing the first dead Tajat onto the platform. They'd have to carry it a little further than they'd been thinking as they approached me, which was already further than normal because of the distance I'd been keeping. This is worse than awkward taking into account the nausea they're clearly suffering.

Only as the third pair pass my position to throw their burden on to the back of my vehicle, do I realise that by switching its position I now have the searing wind taking the worst of the stinking air away from me. I look to Jasig, wanting to judge if that had been his purpose but he is marching briskly past the jagged line of Tendanny with their gross burdens, back to the buildings.

I do not turn to inspect my load even when the vehicle rocks as my fellows climb aboard the bed to stack the bodies firmly. Nobody wants to be picking them up for a second time if they tumble from the platform. They'd not be able to hold in the vomit and no one wants to feel as worthless as a Tajat.

Jasig does not walk back to give his order that all is clear, but waves a signal from the building, indicating the job is complete.

Now, as the team begin a slow, wilting and undignified assessment of their work, I have to look at my load. To make sure it is secure.

I am confused by the smallness of the stack. Must I return for more? I'll have to poxin ask. To me this is still a Guard. A rank I am

forbidden from initiating contact with. But he has turned his back, still and apparently thinking. I'll be getting no visual cue.

So I activate my poxin citrel implant. 'Sir. Forgive my intrusion.'

'Shella,' he sighs, 'I am Tendanny now. This is no intrusion.'

'Right.' I steady my mind. 'Right. You're right.'

He sighs more heavily. 'What do you want, Shella?'

'Sir, must I return?' Only then do I realise I could have saved myself the embarrassment. Our large team, already traipsing back to the ship, have been given the order.

Back at the conveyer belt by the ship, as I wait for the bodies to be passed through the incinerator by a fresh Tendanny crew, I watch the Guard in charge marching back from the buildings we've emptied. He is furious! I can't begin to imagine what we've done wrong or how we are going to suffer for it.

He is shouting to the Guard in charge of the incineration process, 'Jasig Lox is poxin dead!'

The other stepped away from his post. Shocked.

Tendanny continue their toil as though nothing is amiss. Or as if they are deaf. I maintain my blank expression though my thoughts are in turmoil.

The one near me called to the other, 'How?'

The first one, now only a few metres away, has no need to shout. 'He ate rotting Tajat flesh!'

I can't stop myself. Already I am turning to look more closely at what the Tendanny are sending into the incinerator. I'm heaving. With my stomach still painfully empty, I am coughing up bitter bile. They are repulsive! The corpses are, literally, rotting. These Tajats were not killed by the gas.

These bodies are weeks old. These Guards sent Jasig into a charnel house. I, along with my fellow Tendanny, will be isolated for the disease we might already be carrying. Jasig sent me upwind to give me a chance of survival and I thank him for that. These Guards have had their sport spoilt. They'd relished the time of watching Jasig, along with all of his Tendanny crew, dying in isolation, slowly and in agony and he has ruined as much of that as he could.

What Will You Be Doing Monday Evening?

Watching TV? Chatting on your mobile? Or trying to save your daughter's life?

In the third alternate ending offered with this story you'll find three characters that feature in the fifteen-book Vinctalin Legacy series. Might we cheekily mention here that should you read some of those books, and we hope you will because that's why we wrote them, honest ratings and/or reviews, especially on Amazon, are always welcome.

Each volume of the Vinctalin Legacy is a self-contained story, each set of three expands on that and every book has a 'story so far' at the beginning.

Thus, every single book can be read as a stand-alone, as can each trilogy.

If you even believe in aliens, where would you expect the greatest danger to arise if they landed on earth? I wonder if your expectation or imagination would be closer to the truth than mine was.

I choose to begin my story at the place where my daughter and I sought refuge. When we arrived here the streets were ominously, silently occupied by small, disparate groups. In that heavy atmosphere the people who'd arrived with us began seeking shelter from the teeming rain. Men pushed their families to the front, banging on doors and requesting shelter. By the time we could even try that, those ahead of us were being turned away.

I pulled Evie to one side and with a guiding arm moved her away from the others, checking we were not being followed. 'Let's try the side streets.' 'There could be gangs,' she stammered. 'Or even some of *them*.'

I glanced around at the growing mood of frustration, and excitement. 'We can't stay here. We should get moving before everyone else decides to do the same.'

Because my reasoning was self-evident, Evie allowed me to steer her down a dark alley, past some houses with candlelight in the windows and on to a road, as yet with few pedestrians.

The first house we studied had the shadows of people moving inside with a few more amongst trees and shrubs in the garden. They could be anyone, pose any number of dangers, so we moved on to the next place. There we had the door slammed in our faces. For us it was fifth time lucky. And not a moment too soon. We seemed to have attracted the attention of three teenage boys kicking at puddles, thrashing branches they'd torn from trees, whooping and punching at each other.

I hurried Evie into the open door and cried out with relief to see the solid Yale lock fall into place as I closed the door softly, avoiding taking the boys' attention off one another. I then dragged Evie around the ground floor with me, fearful of having crashed into somebody else's place as well as of anyone getting in through windows or a back door.

Once we had all windows and doors locked upstairs as well as down, and in doing so established we were the only occupants, Evie and I stood huddled together, dripping wet, in the spacious lobby. I thanked the Lord we'd found no bodies in the house, shamelessly burying the knowledge that the one-time inhabitants of this place had been taken away on a flatback vehicle by the ghouls in their red uniforms.

The evening light was fading and through teeth chattering from fear as much as the cold, we discussed whether or not we'd dare try the lights before it was too dark to search for candles.

The moment of near relief was shattered by a bang on the door that had both of us jumping and stifling squeals as our hearts pounded and stomachs turned.

'Don't let anyone in,' Evie hissed in my ear, as feral and self-protective as those who'd driven us away from their sanctuaries.

Picturing a vulnerable mother and child on the other side I was about to give a person a chance when more banging and clamouring all around the outside of the house started abruptly, terrifying us. I somehow stopped my taut nerves from snapping whilst assuring Evie they couldn't get in here. 'What if they break the windows?' she breathed.

'No. This double-glazing is like Grandma's. They can't break it. They'll move on.'

'It's those boys.'

Yes, it was. I recognised the voices. My mind sped through our arrival, noting every window and door had been properly locked.

What I didn't think of was to check the loft. That is, I saw the hatch to the loft and assumed it was the same as my mother's simply because there were similarities between the two houses. Stupid! Because that's how they eventually got in.

It had gone quiet outside and we were clinging less tightly together. I was saying, 'I think they've gone,' when we heard a thud on the landing above us. That was followed by creaking floorboards.

My mind as well as my reflexes, had grown diamond sharp. I grabbed Evie's hand, dragging her to the front door. Above all we could not allow ourselves to get trapped in there.

Fumbling with the handle and the lock did not prevent me wrenching the door open in seconds. Neither did we stop dead at the sight of one of the kids standing there, in our faces.

I tugged at Evie, preparing to push past the boy, but he punched me. My hands flew to my face where blood was spurting from my nose and stars flashed, before the pain registered. I was shocked rigid by that casual violence.

I was horrified anew to realise there was a boy inside pulling Evie back into the house. The one who'd hit me pushed me in after them before I could think of calling for help. The two of them thumped, kicked, shoved and dragged us across to the kitchen where the third was calling to them.

I always thought I'd fight back. Previous to this I'd have expected to defend my daughter with everything I had by drawing on the supernatural strength all mothers are known to possess. But I could hardly move. I had my hand clamped over my exploding nose and the other around Evie and all I could see was dim shadows.

It was my daughter who led me to a side wall, away from the cupboards and fridge the boys, heedless of their soaked clothes, were raiding. I guessed they hadn't eaten since they'd joined a convoy just like the one that brought us here.

I croaked towards their blurred forms, 'You only had to ask. I'd have given you food.'

The one I came to know was called Ali.B sprayed crisps, 'Do I look like a fucking beggar?'

I leaned in, motherly, 'We can't turn on each...'

He kicked me in the head.

I froze. I hadn't been struck since a girl at school slapped me for talking to a boy she liked when we were seven. When the shock began to dissipate, the pain set in.

I didn't pass out completely but instead drifted. Evie helped me to lower myself to the floor. We shuffled on our rumps until we could lean on the wall. When I began to rally a little, I tried to speak as calmly as I could muster to what after all were only boys, little older than my daughter.

The voice I actually produced was broken and nasal, 'You have what you want. We'll leave.'

I think they heard me well enough but there was no reaction because the one they called D.Mac had discovered a bottle of champagne in the fridge. He had no idea of the value of it other than it was something he'd never have had access to in his old life.

As he struggled with the wire and the cork, he mumbled what I think was a response to my offer, 'Don't be fucking stupid. We're gonna party.'

He choked on the champagne he tried drinking straight from the bottle and was too slow to prevent the third one, Jo.Ro, grabbing it off him whilst snapping, 'Prat!' as he poured a large helping into a beer glass.

The other two thought that was hilarious.

Evie felt to know more about boys than I did. If I'd known what she was about to say I'd have found a way of keeping her silent.

'I'll party with you.'

They laughed at her.

'I know what you want. I'll do it as long as you let my Mum go.'

'Idiot,' Jo.Ro spluttered whilst swigging the sparkling wine.

D.Mac chuckled as he enjoyed her shock when he explained what I already had figured out. 'The whole point of a party is that we do you against your will.'

'Every which way,' D.Mac added, drooling wine.

Ali.B was distracted though. He'd discovered the freezer. 'Hey! Chips!' It was getting dark. Jo.Ro tried the lights.

'No oven, dope,' he drawled as he strolled over to us, pushed his hand into my little girl's damp and clinging blouse and squeezed her small breast viciously. She screamed in pain and humiliation while I shouted at him to leave her alone. The boy ripped his hand away to slap each of us across the face, silencing and stilling us.

Thankfully, they lost interest in the 'party' when they began poking around the room firstly getting excited by the wads of twenty-pound notes tucked into a dresser drawer and then by other valuables. At Jo.Ro's instruction they began assembling their stash on the neat little dining table.

With their attention off us I lost a little of the helpless dread. A particularly appropriate phrase entered my head: I felt 'spaced out' rather than scared. Like I had at the beginning.

On that day my eight-year-old son Jimmy was still, as usual, in bed eating his breakfast while the three of us had ours at the kitchen table. One of us always took breakfast to him, to give him time to come round. To conserve his energy for washing and dressing. Though his cerebral palsy was mild it was tiring and could be very painful.

I felt my body jerk at the next recollection: an echo of what was happening in this stranger's house. Except these were ordinary, if violent, boys. There'd been nothing ordinary about the intruders at our country smallholding.

At first it seemed like a joke. A university students' or Young Farmers' prank. The two of them sauntered through our open doorway as though they owned the place. They wore scarlet, skin-tight jumpsuits, had golden tans with a faint sheen to the skin like girls out on the town apply, no hair and striking green eyes: an effect I thought they'd achieved with contact lenses. The male had an orange stud in his forehead. I was momentarily drawn to trying to understand how that could possibly have been fixed in because it was embedded, not simply stuck on. In any case, my mind soon shifted back to the immediate issue.

Both of them held what appeared to be weapons. Each held in their right hand a rod that had some kind of business end. In the left they held something resembling a plastic rifle.

No doubt I gaped in stupefaction. I heard Evie laugh. Eventually Morgan said, 'Yes?'

Evie's glittering eyes slid across to her father with a high level of respect for coolness. I'm fairly sure I gasped. I don't know what I'd expected of him but something like, '*Push off!*' or '*You're trespassing!*' would have been more appropriate. At that stage.

Their reaction was to exchange remarks in a foreign language and peculiar voices. I was trying to think what their cause might be as I peered around for cameras or a mate with an iPhone.

It was when they both held up the rods for our inspection that I exchanged suspicious glances with my husband. There was a definite

threat of some kind that neither of us could define. We had never suffered a race hate crime but we had discussed the possibility. Morgan's loved, familiar, dark face told me to play along. He knew I'd want to thump them if that was their game.

That's when Ziggy bounded in, barking and growling at the intruders. He didn't hesitate over the alien confrontation but leapt, snarling at the woman gesticulating instructions, clearly wanting us to stand. It was then that we discovered the purpose of what turned out to be high-tech rods. The man stepped to the side, poked our dog with the end of it and the poor thing fell soundlessly to the floor. I couldn't see him breathing.

Evie and I made to move. To go to Ziggy. But Morgan clamped a hand on each of us. I literally felt a shiver down my spine when I saw fear in my husband's eyes.

As I was in the process of recalling that woman peeling off to search my home, I became aware of movement around me, in this stranger's house. I watched from a bent head, through clouded eyes, as the lads came to the end of trying out foods they'd never had before. They'd left cartons, plates, wasted food, spilt drinks and so on, all over the work tops, around the sink and on the hob. They were laughing, play punching and cheering when another one found something they thought could be worth money.

I released a tiny bit more of the tension as they left the room one at a time, and returned with more valuables. Then I began to tense again because that reminded me of the red-clad woman's search of my home. I could hear her movements followed by scuffling, and Jimmy's voice. Possibly because my son didn't sound scared, I swallowed the impulse to call reassurance to him and instead followed Morgan's urging to obey the man. We shuffled towards the door, all, I guess, trying to think of a way out of this.

He was ready for any possible resistance. He was behind Morgan before we hardly had our footing, holding the rod close to my husband's back. There was no misreading the threat in that golden face, nor in Morgan's question for me: should he try fighting? I gave a light shake of my head. I could think of a dozen awful results of that in an instant.

As we were leaving the house, I could hear my vulnerable son protesting about the speed at which he was being forced down the stairs.

We were lined up on our front parking area when the woman brought Jimmy out and pulled him towards the man. Naturally we all moved to help him as he did the awkward hopping that stopped him tumbling over. And again, we stopped when the stranger prodded Morgan and myself with the rod.

Jimmy was more indignant than afraid when the man began running his hand down my boy's bad leg, took a long look at his floppy foot and then, not roughly, lifted his face to examine slack lips and escaping saliva. Jimmy's speech wasn't clear to strangers but I understood what he said: *Bog off! Creep!* Morgan expressed the same sentiment in far more colourful language. I begged.

It happened in less than a second. The end of the rod touched Jimmy's side, sending him down to the gravel. This time it was all three of us holding one another back but with otherwise different reactions. I screamed for my son to hear me and respond, Evie howled in fear and Morgan bellowed threats. As I cried out my horror I searched in vain, eyes only, seeing no sign of breathing. Just as it had been with Ziggy.

The tears that began then and were never far away, trickled down my cheeks.

Jo.Ro was congratulating D.Mac for the pile of silver candlesticks when he noticed my emotion.

'Aw, don't cry. We'll get around to you. There's hours of fun to come.' D.Mac guffawed appreciation of this outstanding wit as he went about his business.

I could still see my son's body on the stony ground in the early morning sunlight. Morgan recovered some kind of control first but the steps that were intended to take him over to our son were diverted. The man grabbed my husband by the shoulder, at the same time jabbing the rod in his back and shoved him towards the driveway. The woman indicated, again with the sparse incomprehensible speech and threats with the rod, that Evie and I must follow. Morgan and I resisted in our own ways until the woman got our attention. She had hold of Evie, who was crying bitterly, with the rod pressed into her neck.

It was obvious they could cope more easily getting only the two of us down our mud track. So what could we do? What could we do? We left our darling son without a farewell in order to save the life of our daughter. And I for one was too deep in grief to even hate them.

That unfamiliar fear of ignorance and pain growing afresh within me, along with a faint realisation of what was going on in this dead person's home, brought me back to the present. The daughter we'd kept alive was being threatened all over again.

They were sitting at the table, now haphazardly lit by candles, taking a break from the strenuous activity of sorting through their loot by discussing lewd teenage plans of what they could do to us.

Jo.Ro finished that prediction looking directly into my eyes, saying, 'We'll stay here 'til it's over.'

He had no concept of the scale of this invasion. 'Over!'

He grinned at me. 'Yeah. No one's going to care what we do in here before the army comes. By then you won't be in any state to tell them fuck all.'

As they laughed at the perceived 'clever' one's tone and promise, he motioned for them to carry on sorting. He decided they should only take the small, expensive things they could carry and they were all straining the limits of their knowledge to understand the value of the many rare items. They were also fighting greed. One or two of the most precious things were very large and heavy.

More of that morning's events drifted back to me. At the bottom of our dirt driveway we found the Threff's tractor and trailer waiting on the

road. Bill was in the driver's seat while Ann perched on the trailer with Sandy and Pat, a young couple they'd been allowing to camp on the old meadow. Another red-clad stranger stood in the footwell, threatening Bill with his rod, while a fourth stood in the road at the rear of the trailer pointing the rifle-shaped weapon at the passengers. It didn't look quite so plasticky then.

Gestured orders from our attackers had us climbing up to the trailer. I looked away from Ann miserably, when I realised she wanted to know where Jimmy was. Her visible shock had me reeling and falling into Morgan's arms.

When the tractor started moving our pedestrian abductors kept pace, the couple flanking us and the other following behind. It was then that I began weeping. The reality of leaving my son, of his death, was seeping through the shock.

We slotted into a slow-moving convoy of farm vehicles, vans, cars and lorries when we joined another country lane. It was escorted by more of the invaders in red uniforms. Other individuals of their kind variously walked alongside, perched at the back of open-top sports cars, stood up through open sunroofs and clung to the sides of tractors and open vehicle doorways while we, the captives, rode in relative physical comfort.

We'd been trundling along at a leisurely walking pace for almost an hour, mostly too stunned to hardly look at one another never mind speak when we started to witness the wider scale of this attack. More people had been pushed into our trailer and more vehicles joined us. The wailing and lamenting of newcomers turned to near silence when, as we came to the outskirts of a village, we realised that more of the strangers were collecting human bodies.

I wasn't the only one to cry out when my breath returned and I saw them emerging to throw the bodies onto the bed of hovering flatback vehicles, piling them high. Most were human corpses but they'd also taken the remains of large pets and even a goat.

There were a few amongst us whose reaction was to lash out furiously, leaping from the vehicles to attack by hand. Loved-ones tried to pull them back but a number were killed and dispassionately thrown on top of the horrific, growing mound, of the deceased. They had only to raise those rifle-like weapons and glare, to silence our clamouring.

As we passed Mrs. Rimmer's corner shop, a place I'd called in often, I recognised her body being taken out, along with those of her family and the pet dog. My mind would not allow me to imagine Jimmy and Ziggy being handled in that manner. Instead, it homed in on the man whispering next to me.

'Wholesale slaughter. Even Dewey's horse is dead. Whatever it was it didn't reach out to the farms though.'

Morgan and I drew closer, squashing Evie between us, as her sobbing was renewed and grew more desperate when one of those awful, miserably macabre vehicles segwayed into our convoy. A mile or so outside the village it peeled away to go cross-country towards something I

simply did not believe I was seeing. It was matte black, shaped like a teardrop on its side and ten-times the size of a jumbo jet. There was an enormous pile of what looked like ash next to it.

Morgan said, 'Don't look.'

'But I think...'

'Don't think!'

The man who'd whispered the fate of Dewey's horse seemed more robust than most of us. He'd had more experience with them too.

'No. We have to think. We have to face it. We have to take some chances. Mostly they only use the rod and that doesn't kill...'

I swung around to him, 'What!'

'The rod only stuns. If we...'

I cut him off, pulling at Morgan's arm, 'Jimmy!'

My husband didn't hesitate, 'I'll get back to him. Somehow.'

The whispering man caught onto our dilemma. 'I'll go with you. Your wife and daughter will be safer here. They want us alive otherwise we'd be on our way to that pile.'

Morgan didn't have to speak to shut him up.

To this day I have no idea who he was, other than an exceptionally brave man. He guided Morgan in edging, unnoticed to the side of the trailer, and made him wait for their best opportunity. That came as we were winding through a forest road. I'd been watching them closely and even I had no idea they were about to go over the side and sprint for the deep-set trees.

I don't actually know for certain if my husband got away. I choose to believe that he did. I do know that the other man did not. He was taken down by a bolt from the rifle-shaped weapon I knew by then to be the one that kills. It laid him low in the undergrowth. I didn't see Morgan fall and the strangers didn't bring his body back with the other one.

There were one or two other attempts at escape during that dreadful, day-long journey, including Pat and Sandy. They didn't survive either. Out in the country the bodies of others that tried and failed were by then being left where they fell, but I'd seen enough clearing up of even farm animals by the swarms of what I was then thinking of, rightly or wrongly, as aliens, that I knew they also would be turned to dust by that monstrous machine, spaceship?. In any case, it kept the rest of us quietly under control.

Evie brought me back to our new plight when she whispered, 'Mum!' I refocused on the boys with clearer sight than before, vaguely feeling relieved to know I wasn't concussed after all.

Their loot was sorted into piles like a Venn diagram. It seems that despite their efforts they'd picked up something from their school lessons. Or maybe it was untested intelligence motivated by raw greed. They'd started on the hard liquor and they were talking about us. Particularly Evie. My daughter was terrified to be faced with the imminent result of that attention. As much as I'd once tried to police her internet use, I realised

that, at only fourteen, they knew more ways they could rape and ruin her than I could imagine.

Suddenly, amidst the rude banter, filthy jokes and raucous laughter Jo.Ro dashed across to grab hold of Evie. I fought to hold onto her, frantically trying to think of some new distraction. I screamed and howled, punched and bit and in spite of the legendary superhuman strength I was supposed to have for my child, I could do no more when he released his grip on my daughter in order to kick me in the back, ribs and head.

Through a pink haze of blood, I saw him dragging my little girl across the floor. And through swelling ears I heard Evie crying out for me, and for her Daddy. The other two boys were laughing and choking on whiskey.

Any hope remaining, died.

I could hear my baby crying out for me at some distance, in some place beyond the thick fog in my head. I simply couldn't rally. Instead, of all things, or perhaps because of my impotence, I drifted into semi-conscious memories. My story resumed at the point when our slow convoy arrived at an alien scene in rural England. We stared blindly for a while before looking to one another, shaking heads uncomprehendingly.

The amber wall closed in a whole village. I could see a church spire and the roofs of a few tall buildings within that baleful boundary. Around the outside of the wall the ground had been reduced to a band of gravel and sand.

Our convoy veered away some hundred metres before meeting that barrier, following the strangers at a tangent to it. We came to another area roughly cleared of trees and with mangled allotments. A half row of bungalows remained eerily intact. We watched in confusion as smooth green walls seemed to grow up from the ground, forming a huge rectangle. In the surrounding area other vehicles already were parked, tightly packed.

The convoy was stopped just as a light rain began to fall. We were ordered off and poked, prodded and commanded in language we couldn't understand until we were all kneeling on the local playing field while our drivers took their vehicles to park with those already there. Only one person tried to run. She was killed in a place where I could picture children once playing football.

When the drivers were marched back to us the strangers had us stand and join them in the slow, relentless pace habitually maintained by our captors, back across the land we'd driven over to the amber wall. They remained outside whilst holding weapons on us, clearly demanding we should enter through the opening now appearing there.

I'm sure most, like me, felt relieved to leave them behind even when the wall closed, trapping us in here. It was when I looked around for Bill and Ann, unable to spot them, that I felt fearful of my own kind. I

realised instantly that we'd lost one level of protection when we lost our guards.

The atmosphere of a village emptied of its inhabitants hung heavy, not least because we all knew what had happened to the one-time residents. My fellow travellers in their small family and friends' groups were quickly disappearing down the streets, looking for safety no doubt. I grabbed Evie's hand and did the same. I wandered if anyone else we came across on that long trek ended up in as horrific a situation as we had.

Alternate ending 1

It was when the other two boys staggered out of the room, swigging booze, laughing and bumping into each other as well as the doorway, that I realised this was my one and only chance. Earlier horrors had served me well. Evie, being dragged along with them, was terrified and she'd certainly get hurt. But the latter would be far less severe than if I went scrambling after them in a panic.

They'd left me alone. In the kitchen. Because they were too drunk to think clearly. I knew the crippling pains all through my body were warnings that I'd achieve nothing quickly or with any great force.

I rolled to my side, battled to get up to my hands and knees and finally stood, staggering and swaying. I waited for my head to throb a little less and my vision to clear a little more, whilst steadyng myself with a hand on the wall. I hardly needed my sight to tell me where things were in this room. I shuffled stiffly across to the worktop and drew the biggest knife from the knife block.

I could hear Evie crying and begging. That almost spurred me into action too hasty for any hope of success. Then I heard their slurred goading, insults and threats. I could hear my daughter crashing into furniture, being pushed from one boy to another, as I flexed my fingers and wrist joint. I could hear her clothes being torn while I tested my balance and the strength in my legs. And I could hear Jo.Ro's filthy language as I held myself upright close to the doorway, noting the location of each boy by his voice.

They were in the lounge with D.Mac close to the door. Ali.B sounded drunk and slumped, further away than the other two. He was probably over by the window. And the sound of Jo.Ro's voice telling my daughter what he thought he was about to do to her as the sofa springs twanged when he threw her onto it, told me his position in the room.

I gave myself instructions. And I followed them to the letter. On my way into the room I clumsily punched the knife into D.Mac's back and pulled it away as he fell. I had been right to use both hands for maximum impact as well as for reversing the action.

Controlled fury strengthened me when I saw Jo.Ro pulling up jeans over an erect penis as he punched my child's bare backside out of his way in order to confront me. He shouldn't have used time on the

trousers, or have bothered to try frightening me with crude demonstrations of power. He seemed to expect me to somehow try stabbing his body because he stepped sideways with his fists out, while I slashed him across the face. I'd been aiming for both eyes. I only got one. The tough little bastard, shouting out his fury, held a hand to that whilst trying to grab me with the other. But he no longer had binocular vision and made poor spatial judgements. I sliced down the arm and hand reaching for me. 'Fucking cow!' he yelled, pulling that arm back and swinging feet to kick at my legs when he'd have been more successful sweeping my feet from under my pained and damaged body. That I gave him no reminder of. I would not allow myself to so much as wince in my agony.

His actions provided me with the opportunity to cut the blade through one thigh and then the shoulder. He was getting soaked in his own blood, swearing and shouting but Ali.B could not shake his senses out of their drunken stupor to come to his aid.

I took a swipe at the good hand over Jo.Ro's bleeding eye, drew the blade heavily down his arm and then, with him writhing and blinded by rage, I jabbed the point of the knife blinding him physically too.

Evie scrunched up into the end of the sofa, afraid his flailing arms would find her as I made my way purposefully over to Ali.B, who was by then no threat to us. Hardly conscious, he held the gin bottle loosely in his fingers.

However, he was conscious and fully aware when he embarked on this caper, this lark, this whatever modern kids call assault, abuse, rape and murder. So, I made my way over to where he'd slid down the wall and stabbed him. In and out, just like D.Mac but in the chest not the back.

By then Jo.Ro was feeling his way around, trying to locate Evie by her frightened little sounds, probably with a view to threatening her in some way in order to stop me. Occupied as he was, quiet as I was, he had no warning of the danger coming his way.

I left him bleeding from a deep wound in his gut. I'd heard that was a particularly lengthy and painful way to die.

Alternate ending 2

When I came round, I was aware of pain in every part of my body. I opened my eyes to the dim dawn light. I have no idea how long it took me to move but I do know I spent all of that time desperately trying to make myself crawl to wherever Evie was.

Finally, I managed to roll to my side. And in time, to sit up. I found myself still on the kitchen floor with my blouse ripped open, my bra cut apart and my jeans and pants gone. I was bleeding from what they'd done to me. All I could think is that that is what they've done to Evie.

Somehow, I rose to my feet, staggered, fell, and rose again, fell again, and crawled and clawed my way through to the lounge where I found my darling daughter.

I scrambled over, pulling her battered and bleeding body into my arms, trying to weep quietly so as not to frighten her further, as though that were even possible.

At some point, I have no idea how much later, I responded to a woman's voice. She must have been there for a while but she seemed to have done more than cover us both with blankets before pulling up a chair close to me.

She spoke with feeling. 'I can help you. You're both safe now.' I hardly glanced at her irrelevant presence and sympathy. I simply clung to my daughter's destroyed body while invented images of her ordeal flashed and scrolled through my mind.

Alternate ending 3

I could see dawn breaking through the patio doors of the lounge, when I finally came round. My first reaction was to try to get to my feet, to find Evie.

Two hands held me down. 'You must keep still. You have a concussion.' He was firm but kind. 'Your companion is safe.'

'My daughter.' My feeble, croaking voice caught in strained emotion as I struggled against the hands until a deeper and considerably less soothing male voice told me what I needed to know.

'Alex here's a doctor. Your daughter's all patched up and sedated. The bastards who did this to you went on the rampage and got killed by the Tendanny. Which saved me a job. And you'll be OK, so keep bloody still.' Alex, the doctor, took over with more compassion, 'Caroline and I can manage here. Maybe you could check the streets again, Stanzi.'

'Yeah,' he met my eyes flashing black fury that I knew was aimed at my torturers and I had no sympathy for any like them that he might root out. In fact, had I the strength, I'd have urged him on for some kind of vicarious revenge.

Which is your favourite ending? We would love to know. Contact us on www.vinctalin.com

Guilt

Kate

We went down to the rec, me and Rob, Emma and Ted. Jack was hanging around down there. I tried to turn before he saw me but it was like he had a special radar as far as I was concerned. When he waved I pretended I hadn't seen him. Rob told me that was mean.

'He's a bit weird, that's all.'

'Doesn't mean I have to talk to him. It just encourages him.'

Emma and Ted stopped walking and turned to us.

Ted said, 'We could just say hi and walk past him.'

'He won't let you.'

They all knew that. You couldn't get away from the nutcase once you acknowledged his existence.

Emma always felt sorry for him. 'We're not doing anything anyway. Give him half an hour then we'll go back to mine.'

I didn't want Rob to think I was mean. 'OK. But just remember I know him best and I warned you: he lies. *All* the time.'

We sat on the grass near the skateboarding park. Jack, true to form, didn't ask to join us. He grinned happily and sat with us. As though he was welcome. A best buddy.

We were talking about our exam results when he broke in with a description of something he reckoned he had seen. There was supposedly a swarm of them but one came low enough for him to see it clearly. It was like a floating fish, in the air, with two huge mouths: the top one had razor sharp teeth and the bottom one was something like a beak behind the flesh. Eyes on the side of its head. He said it had the general shape of Casper the Friendly Ghost. Definitely a different sort of demon from the ones that had attacked a year ago. Totally different from the others in all ways. They only bit lumps out of people but this one had something more sinister in mind, even than that. He could sense it. Lol. I said, 'Did anyone else see it?'

He met my eyes conspiratorially, as though we shared a secret. 'Of course not.'

Jack

Writing this down clearly but it's not like I'll ever forget what I saw. This demon was nothing like the last ones that had attacked earth in a plague. It was floating in the air: no limbs and a bit like a human baby-sized tadpole. It had two mouths. No kidding. Both stretching halfway around its head end, one above the other. The upper mouth had top and bottom rows of razor-sharp teeth. The lower mouth, top and bottom, was like hard and sharp gums, like huge thumb nails.

It hovered around my left shoulder whispering to me.

'You ruined your mother's life,' it had hissed at me.

Seriously! Did I? She was always down the school for me. Sent for by teachers, heads, psychs. And always cried when we got home.

It began in primary school. I was accused of hitting another kid. Yeah, I waved my fist and shouted a bit but she had just said I killed my baby sister. We were five. Obviously someone, her mother, had put that idea into her head.

It was a regular accusation throughout Infant school, when she spread the story there. And, whenever I stood up for myself, I was the one to get in trouble. By the time we got into Juniors I was simply being told I was odd. By everyone. All of the time. Seriously! Who do you reckon was getting bullied?

My Dad used to just tell me to know in my heart that I am a good person. He played with me, took me to football, helped me with my homework, which Mum never did, and I helped him cook tea, mend everything from a lamp to the car and we did the gardening together. And, whenever the other kids bullied me, he just said I should stay at home and help him 'til it all blows over, son'. That carried on through secondary school but I did gather friends on the way.

I didn't get invited to birthday parties but my Dad used to do something almost every year for my birthday. Even the year when I hit four just after my baby sister died and then every year until I was ten. He invited grandparents. Don't remember anyone talking to me or playing with me though, except Dad.

Anyway, I had mates by the time we went to big school. Lots of them. We'd meet down the rec and go on the school bus together. I'd hand out fags to the backseat elite, basking in their admiration over my getting hold of such good gear.

So, on that day I was waiting for my friends in the village, to tell them what I had seen.

Rob

We'd just started our second GCSE year when Katy and I got together. She was upset by the pressure of the courses and by Jack's odd clinging to what he regarded as his lifelong friend. The latter troubled her especially because of the accident with his baby sister. That was when she told me how Jack killed his baby sister. And if she ever mentioned it in his hearing, he hit her. She remembered it vividly. Their mothers were friends and Jack and Katy played together since they could crawl. When they were four and alone in a room with the baby, Jack wanted to let his new sister join in the game. Katy tried to stop him but he pushed her aside. That was when he dropped the baby. Katy ran to the mothers. The baby died in hospital.

His mother was distraught, naturally. Some think that's what caused Jack's problems but I think he was a poor liar. A personality disorder, I guess. Very likely why he did the stupid thing with his baby sister that turned into tragedy. Some would call it bullying but really, we were just trying to teach him a lesson. He had to learn to be normal or leave us alone.

Jack

They were talking about the party they'd all been invited to when I noticed the swarm high in the sky.

'They're here.'

I glanced at the puzzled faces quickly turning to fear when five of the things peeled away and came straight at us.

'Demons,' I told them.

'What the hell!' Rob stood, pulling Kate to her feet, intending to run for it. The demons hovered by our shoulders: one each. I laughed. The girls screamed. Then just gaped stupidly as the one by Ted's shoulder spoke. In English. Lol.

It clacked the beak mouth and hissed, 'You bullied your classmate,' the tail wagged, it twisted to me, and back again, 'You bullied Jack. He tried to kill himself because of it.'

I laughed. Ted glared at me, as if I'd told tales to his demon. I laughed more.

'Now you feel guilty,' it continued. Then its voice rose in an accusing shriek, 'You almost killed him! You *wanted* to kill him! To stab him!'

Mine was trying to talk to me but my attention was on Ted.

'You should die!' it squealed. 'Die!'

Ted's hand slipped into his jeans' pocket and emerged with a strip of pills. Emma whispered, 'What? Ted? Don't...'

He was popping pills out of the strip.

'Ted,' she tried to keep a steady voice, while her demon told her secret, 'You killed your baby.'

She cried out and looked to us, one after another, 'I didn't... I didn't know...'

'Ted told you to. So you did. You're weak!' The voice of this one rose sharply, 'You always do what Ted tells you! You knew it was wrong. That you'd hate yourself. But you murdered it!'

She tried to tell Kate, 'It was an abortion. Three months. That's not...'

'Kill yourself! Go to your baby!'

As Ted tossed the pills into his mouth, Emma snatched the strip.

'Take them!' it screamed, while she fumbled to get the tablets out of their blisters.

Rob and Kate were too busy trying to resist their demons to help. I was captivated by Ted falling flat and shaking, and by Emma gulping the pills as fast as she could.

My demon said, 'You killed your baby sister!'

I said, 'Yeah. So what! I had my reasons.'

'You feel guilty,' it hissed.

'No I don't,' I told it smoothly. 'And that beak is just stupid!'

'You ruined your mother's life!' it howled. 'She hates you!'

I ignored that in favour of watching Rob. He was spellbound by the accusations being hissed by Kate's demon.

'You killed the baby.'

'No! I didn't!' she shouted.

'You blamed Jack! Two lives ruined! By you!' it squealed.

'No! He did it! Jack! Tell them!'

'Them? Who?'

'Rob! It's not true! It was Jack!'

Rob was staring at me. Bewildered.

I told him soberly, 'It was her memory. I got so I thought I'd made it up so I didn't have to blame myself. But I remember now. Kate tried to take my baby sister out of the cot...'

'No! Rob! I didn't!'

'You killed her!' the demon growled.

'She dropped my baby sister,' I produced a tear.

Rob's demon told him, 'You bullied Jack because you believed this female's lies! He wants to kill himself because of you! So does his mother! Both of you must die!'

I passed Rob and Kate a strip of pills, each, and nodded when they looked to each other and then me.

'Swallow them!' Kate's demon howled.

'Eat them!' Rob's demon howled

While they swallowed their tablets I took the last strip from my pocket. Mum's tablets came with a strict a warning to never take more than one in 12 hours. It was after the last visit of my demon that I took her new box full and waited until it told me when and where to go. Who to give them to.

My demon said, 'You killed your friends!'

I looked at my tablets.

'You planned it! You intended to murder them!' It growled.

'Murderer!' It squealed.

'Murderer!' Kate's demon hovered closer, shrieking.

Rob and Ted's flew over, circling my head with the others, chorusing in a scream, 'You killed the baby and you murdered your friends! Take those tablets!'

'Kill yourself!' They cried in unison, over and over again.

I looked from one crazed demon to the another, and told them, 'No, I don't think so.'

'You killed your friends! You killed your baby sister! You ruined your mother's life! You are stupid! An object of scorn. A weak and bullied coward! Die! Die! Die!' they howled.

I looked to the packet of pills in my hand and the bodies of my friends, then answered the demons, 'They killed themselves because they were guilty, the baby's death was an accident, my Mum chose to wallow in self-pity instead of loving the child that still lived. I was clever enough to lead you to my bullies and I am not afraid of you!' And I wasn't. I'd had good training in not being affected by bullies.

Guilt is a story based on the alien invader in our second Guy Edrich book,

*Autarkhos. Vanda doodled the creatures featured here during an idle moment
and later built the novel and this tale around them. The book does not include these teenagers but does feature multiple narrators.*

How might these creatures be related to the principal alien invader in the novel: Autarkhos? How will Guy vanquish them?

We don't think you'll guess before reaching the conclusion of Autarkhos.

A Plague of Demons

This next story is based on the hero and the ‘demon invaders’ in Cacodaemus, the first book in our trilogy featuring Guy Edrich, a member of a secret society hailing from another realm.

Quoting Guy: As a child I held a concept of another, a non-corporeal life which, as an adult I could no longer perceive.

The narrator below is also a member of that society.

I had been in the deepest of sleeps, and so awaking in my own familiar bed with someone next to me was something of a shock. I studied Kirstie’s relaxed, soundly sleeping form for a moment only, because another presence caught the corner of my eye. Black Shuck. I had never before seen that harbinger of doom inside my house. The big black dog that had appeared to me no more than ten times before, had his fiery eyes trained on me. I felt a wave of relief as I was reminded that this augur did not visit the one soon to be taken to hell.

Thus, by process of elimination, I feared for my guest. With that came some concern for the consequences for myself, in having brought a relative stranger into a Credentes house.

Always an optimist, I allowed for the possibility that my new behaviours had brought this visitor inside, and that he in fact, heralded disaster outside of it. With the hope of my new friend remaining safely within this realm, I ventured downstairs with the aim of examining the world from my front door. I’m not going to pretend timidity, Guy, but I was suspicious of every shadow I passed.

Apprehension gnawed at my mind when I opened the front door to observe Wisht Hounds flying in the sky. As you know only too well, they tell of considerably more than a single soul being driven to hell. You’ll recall I first saw them when training with you on the moors. It was a wild night, when the moon emerged, glowing from behind huge, black, rolling clouds and we both saw them: Gabriel Hounds bounding over the rough ground hunting a stag. You had no need to explain the meaning of what we saw there. Neither of us was able to discern who the victims would be then. Now alerted to an unknown danger I, at the very least, believed then that the girl I’d brought home with me was not to be one of the damned.

I saw the first monster careening around the corner into my normally quiet, leafy avenue. Its accompanying howls and screams were a reminder of yesterday’s adventure and I feared I’d unwittingly brought to my home locality something far more disastrous than one human girl.

All I had time to note on this occasion was that it had the appearance of a deformed and deranged man, with exceptionally broad shoulders, powerful upper arms and thighs, and with filthy, matted, shoulder-length black hair.

My neighbour, Colin, a middle-aged man who’d shown concern for my well-being since he realised I’d been left alone in the house, shouted a warning.

'Get inside now, Eli! Now! There's a whole bloody plague of these bloody demons!'

The 'demon' that he also could see and so was not one of my visions, grabbed hold of a terrified man who lived further along the road. One who'd been too slow to re-enter the safety of his home.

Colin yelled again, 'Get inside and lock all doors and windows, Eli!'

He retreated into his house when we saw three more demons squealing into our avenue. Kirstie came tottering to the door, half dressed, to see what the noise was about. I pushed her back in and slammed the door.

She was shaking. 'What the hell are they?'

The fact she could see them too finally had reality registering with me. I'd become blasé over my apparitions: Black Shuck and the others telling of a future I could have no effect on. And, alright I admit it Guy, in the process of breaking the Credentes code the previous day, I'd somehow inured myself to any real and immediate peril.

In my defence, as soon as I realised my folly and accepted that those things were real, solid and demonically brutal, I sprang into action.

While I ran around the house checking the windows were locked, Kirstie stared out of the lounge window, at the action. She was still there when I came back downstairs.

She half-turned as I spun into the room, 'That man said they was demons.'

Even at that point I wanted to correct her grammar which is really stupid, and I know for certain that you of all people are aware of everything that goes with that.

That finicky urge to judge a non-Credentes was a reminder of the one person in this world who could just possibly help me: you. That in turn, had me recalling how I came to be alone in the first place.

My sister, still just strong enough for the ordeal but losing genetic cohesion in this place, had to be taken 'home' by Mother, while I, too well established here, could not leave. I'd sat with them in Caitlin's bedroom, Mother on one side of my sister and me on the other. I watched them fade, while I did not.

After they'd gone, I remained on my sister's bed for some time, oscillating between mourning the loss of them and celebrating Caitlin's freedom from pain, more than the long life she would now enjoy.

I'd dreamed of being free for as long as I could remember. Released from all the rules and restrictions that governed my life.

I didn't contact you then, when I should have, because I knew you'd drag me back into that old oppressive regime. That society where my mother's people judged themselves people of light, justice and love while their concept of love was lacking. I could feel it. That was why I didn't contact you then. I imagined you, as my Godfather, restricting my chances of freedom and fun even more than my mother had.

I'd known love. I'd loved my sister from the moment she was born, with every fibre of my being. When she was two, and I six, I began

sleeping in her bed with her, protecting my little broken sister from the one who would steal her away to the underworld. The man no adult could see. The one Mother forbade me speaking of.

Because I was unafraid of my visions and visitations, and because of my determination, Takkenman ceased in his efforts to take her. At the age of eleven I had a bed of my own moved into her room and as the years passed, I kept her safe from all other malevolent visitors.

None had remotely resembled those beings out in my street. The one that had mauled and bitten my three-doors down neighbour, continued to prod and poke at his body. It sucked at his torn flesh, seemingly without the satisfaction I fancied observing on its initial attack.

I watched the back view of it, with its firm, large buttocks, creep around the side garden of Colin's house, while another scaled a picket fence fronting the garden of the house opposite Colin's. Directly opposite my house a third stood in the middle of the road, slowly turning, scrutinising the trees lining the avenue. I noticed a curve to that one's spine, a short tail, wide at the base, and human set hips. Though it was the size of a silverback, it did not have the skeletal framework of one.

A fourth, standing on the pavement in front of me, studying my house and garden, provided me with the closest view. I noted a larger than average penis, light, all-over ginger body hair on pale skin and the eyes that had prompted Colin to call it a demon: scarlet and flaming. As more than one of my uninvited hauntings sported those I was less shocked than Colin, less willing to assign any nature to them and equally terrified of what their presence might presage.

I had no idea how to protect myself and I even began feeling some responsibility for bringing Kirstie here. No one in the brethren was aware I'd failed to depart with Mother and Caitlin. I didn't want the life Mother would have taken me to, any more than I wanted a life in the Credentes. Within a few days of their departure I'd begun to anticipate parties, fiction books, computer games and television. I'd have been free of Barguest, the Boggart, the Obsidian Man and the rest of them but their dark company was a price I gladly paid when I set out on my foray into a forbidden world.

My first, and last, adventure was to gate-crash a party I'd spotted on social media. I'd been hacking into the accounts of fellow teenagers I saw but was forbidden to mix with.

The Wisht Hounds were flying in the sky then, as I drove Mother's big Rolls Royce. They were a portent of death connected to my activities but I wasn't concerned. I'd know no one at the party. I'd not be losing anyone I cared for.

As I parked the car, I saw a youth of my age loitering on the pavement outside the small house of the party. A tall boy with curly blonde hair and fine features, stood out not because of his striking good looks but because of his garb. Far from being in the fashion of non-Credentes teens and not even normal for the time of year, he wore a greatcoat in the height of summer.

When I slipped the car in between two considerably smaller, shabbier models I made a mental note to change the Rolls Royce for something more fitting.

As anticipated, I was able to tag along with three raucous guests, flash a big, natural grin at the person who opened the door and stepped into the noise of modern music, shouted conversations and laughter. I gave no sign of recognising the lad at the door. That is, I had no fear of having seen his co-walker on the pavement moments earlier. I realised the co-walker was here to collect him and that this young man was the person whose imminent death the Wisht Hounds heralded.

There was no question of trying to prevent the inevitable. Thus, no choice to be made. I'd experience a party and at some point the puzzle would be solved. In fact, rather than guess how the boy was to die, I'd be in a position to learn first-hand one of the dangers the brethren strove to 'protect' us from.

I learned also, that I wasn't so repulsive as to not be drawn into a dance with a number of different girls, though none persevered with my attempts at said entertainment for many minutes. However, shuffling about in a tight embrace with one of the girls, proved very enjoyable for me. It certainly stirred up some bodily reactions that had been kept quite well in check with vigorous daily exercise and intense combat training of all types, until Mother left.

This girl, who'd shown most interest in me, without asking questions, was the one I happily hoped to lose my virginity to. That was a long-held positive ambition I had until then, been discouraged from contemplating. As if the brethren didn't remember their teenage years! Also, a position they never had to defend since they could merely command all Credentes youngsters to obey, one way or another.

So, free of that repression, I encouraged Kirstie joyfully, if clumsily. She'd felt wonderful in public in her clothes and a little later, upstairs in someone's parents' bedroom, she was breathtaking, literally, to begin with.

I had no need to slow myself. Nothing had been more relaxing, more worthy of experiencing every caress, every sigh, every tingle and...

OK I deleted the rest of that report. You know better than any of our people how good that is.

I was brought back to the present dire circumstances by the girl I'd wanted to help for a few days at least. Kirstie's voice emerged in a tremulous whisper as she grabbed my arm, so tight I'd have to hurt her to get her off me, 'That game Dean was playing. He summoned a demon. You knew what it was.'

In fact, I didn't. I couldn't even be sure if the thing that was screaming was the same thing I saw. What I saw was Barguest. And I'd only been visited by that once before. Barguest is much bigger than Black Shuck and though he has the same fire in his eyes, he also has horns and

fangs. His howling told me that someone was about to die but he was not there merely as an omen. No doubt you are aware that Barguest can cause savage wounds that never heal. Irrespective of our differences in perception, I knew the best I could do was try to get Kirstie away. I now questioned the frying pans and fires situation.

I'd closed all curtains to avoid drawing attention from the unidentified beasts but now peeped out to see that they were still prowling the street.

Mother always spoke of you as a saint, an angel and a hero all rolled into one and at this stage I questioned if my Godfather was even a fraction of what she believed him to be, because that would make you my only hope. So, in all honesty, I phoned you because I had nothing to lose by trying.

Thus, with the phone to my ear, still peeping through the gap in the curtains I noted them now scaling the buildings. Kirstie hadn't yet seen that, so when one broke through an upstairs window she ran screaming down the stairs and was at the front door fumbling with the lock before I could get to her because I'd flown up the stairs to lock the beast into the bedroom. Because of that foresight I was too late rushing down the stairs to prevent her leaving. Also, I still had the thing in the house, breaking down the bedroom door.

I barricaded myself into the lounge by dragging heavy furniture across the door and then again peered through the curtains longing to see you careening up the road in your Land Rover.

Amidst all that mayhem stood, flew and floated all my old hauntings: Barguest and Black Shuck, the boggart, a squat, grizzly demon, and Shadow People. They were only augurs of the real horror though, because now Black Shuck's earlier presence inside my house played out its eerie meaning in real time and space.

The stupid girl had run from the house screaming. Obviously, that attracted the attention of all monsters in the vicinity. I noted though, there was no calculated closing in on her. No concerted effort. My heart, already rapidly hammering, increased speed and power as the one inside my house scraped and growled in an effort to reach me.

I turned now, from the violently rattling door to witness the one nearest to Kirstie snagging her arm. When its teeth sank in she collapsed, wailing and howling, to her knees. Moments later another veered at a tangent from across the avenue, and was sinking those awful razor teeth into her shoulder when a third sped over from Colin's garden to pull her leg out by the heel so that he could rip a lump from her calf.

She suffered long minutes being pinned down like that, as they savoured her flesh in their mouths with no more biting. While she fought for breath, choking, sobbing, groaning and keening, I spotted the fourth descending from a house where I'd seen it earlier. That one made use of her other leg. And the one inside my house landed a heavy blow to my door, making me cry out my horror.

For my personal file: read my first report to Guy Edrich prior to the following notes:

All through that I'd been frantically relaying the ghoulish scenes to Guy, on the phone.

'Where are you?'

That flashed up all the news he didn't know about me. 'At home.'

There was a pause.

'She's getting ripped to pieces, Guy!'

'I'm on my way.'

The phone went dead.

I'd begun hoping they'd finished with the girl and planned to leave the house through the window when they moved away. I somehow stoked up the courage to consider how to use that same egress to rescue what was left of her. But before I could transform the scheme into action, the monsters each began on a second round of feeding on her poor body.

Though gurgling, moaning and spluttering still emanated from Kirstie, I think shock saved her from a little of the horror. Flesh was torn from her arm, her backside, the until-then untouched thigh and finally from her throat. Again, they stopped to suck on that part of her they each held in their mouths. And the one inside increased its battering at my door. I fought for breath while my heart continued its awful thumping.

I became aware of some movement at the end of the street and turned fearing the arrival of another demon. But what I saw emerging from my many floating visions, was Guy Edrich's Land Rover, creeping closer.

He slipped from it aiming what I knew to be his M24 sniper rifle, and stepped closer until one became aware of the fresh warm body of a human. As it straightened to stand tall, staring unafraid, Guy sent a bullet through its head. The next one, rising from Kirstie's bloody corpse, immediately fell from another fatal shot. I'd have cheered if I didn't fear he'd be too late to save me from the demon rumbling on the other side of my now splintering door.

The other two charged. I cried out. I couldn't help it though I'll state for my personal reminder, I was more concerned about my fate should he be killed, than for Guy's personal predicament.

But Guy, in character with the hero in Dean's computer game, slipped back into his vehicle and pulled away as they dived for him. He left them rolling on the ground, screeched to a halt, leaned from the driver's door with his Baretta and fired a bullet into the head of one of them. As the last one came rushing and diving for him, he reversed on squealing tires, sent up smoke as he skidded to a halt and was standing for a good aim with the rifle before it hardly staggered to its feet.

I gulped for air, smothered my cries with one hand and clutched at my heart with the other, as Guy returned to his car and waited. It felt like a lifetime. All that was left of mine at any rate. There was even a new, unnamed apparition in the road, that could herald my demise for all I knew. It was long enough for all my other phantoms to crowd out the

street. And it was long enough for the one just outside my door to begin ripping off panels.

That horrific, unspeakably foul fiend was inside the room, clambering over my broken barricade by the time I was halfway out of the window. It had hold of my arm before I'd taken two steps across my small front garden. And its jaws were wide before its splattered bone and blood hit me in the face.

Vinctalin

A small group of survivors on Earth have upset a rigid pre-ordained social balance.

Raging battles ensue: brother versus sister, masters seeking vengeance against failing slaves, and heroes with bold plans making the greatest sacrifice of all.

The Vinctalin are ferocious in their response to the disorder provoked by a few rebellious Tajats, and which their own Emperor has failed to quell.

In each of the fifteen books of The Vinctalin Legacy series there is a Prologue and an Epilogue. Most of them are written from the point of view of the alien invaders. That approach is followed in this story, along with the employment of multiple narration in order to intensify the duplicity of two particular Vinctalin. Of these story tellers, which would you label an ‘unreliable narrator’?

Goranvilaz

I am slyly observing Barenbana at the helm while its crew, all unworthy of names, settle the ship into Earth's orbit. It smugly extends and retracts its new wrist spike and I note by the flashing electric blue at the base of its crest, the activation of its accretion brain. That wrist spike is now fully primed for administering a variety of poisons. Each one with a number of purposes can now be sent through the freshly re-engineered weapon to paralyse, agonise and kill any victim of any species it chooses to bestow its attention upon. Or any Vinctalin planning to challenge it in an attempt to take a name. The one I chose only a decade ago could soon become known to the clan.

Barenbana is listening to the seemingly sober orders of our clan chief in the lead ship. Halbolival is excited. I have rarely, during the thousand years of my life serving this chief who seems to be immortal, known that. I doubt any but Horgelerol and Rakvelerol will recognise an emotion Halbolival would deny experiencing, if they dare to challenge it on that, which they won't.

I am superbly engineered. Though far from new my organs, my spine, my bones, remain supremely powerful. There are no faults in my epidermis, nor in the energy shield laying beneath it. Nothing can penetrate my crest or the shutters on my eyes and nostrils. I have the best implants available to any Vinctalin clan. This report is a testament to you, Halbolival. You will extract the truth from this implant in my brain and you will understand why I had to challenge Barenbana.

So, we are going down. I have never before experienced a thrill in landing for a harvest so great that it will propel us to the top of the Hierarchy. It is the satisfaction of knowing your pleasure, our shared triumph, in being the clan that finally forces Benjesrial out of first place.

There is turbulence as we pass through the atmosphere but we land smoothly, in the site I located. I, along with my three unnamed companions set to running our tests following that troublesome entry. Barenbana is now ordering me to leave the others to complete that task and begin collecting reports from our Emperor.

Barenbana

At last, we have a planet that is ripe and abundant. This is a world with everything but purple lekka. And you, Halbolival, are entrusting a large sector of it to me. I will repay that confidence ten-fold. You will have the very best of space-worthy transport, tested and ready to take the spawning to your rendezvous point. They will be furnished with landing craft and vehicles for use by the Guards and Tendanny. They will bristle with rods and gems. The lab will be comprehensively equipped and stocked. From there, our population will increase exponentially with subsequent spawnings.

But that is the future. Here and now, I can report that the pegrizone has taken effect and my Emperor has established his base. Already he is preparing to deploy his Guards and Tendanny. Gems and ores as well as alloys new to us, materials manufactured by Tajats but nevertheless promising, simply wait on the surface to be collected.

This planet was swarming with healthy Tajats. Even with the best organs taken for strengthening and following the establishment of the slave workforce, the incinerators will be overtaxed in the disposal of unwanted Tajats. I will therefor order the construction of more incinerators.

The soils here are fertile. The rijn will grow rapidly, affording a plentiful supply of rinjinjin; more than enough for the new spawning, all Vinctalin here, Emperors and Guards. This will be our greatest benefit. This will ensure our victory.

Who can challenge your clan, Halbolival? After this harvest: no one.

My Deputy is watching. It has probably devised a name for itself. It plans to challenge me. I am certain of that.

Goranvilaz

Barenbana has brought the young one up to the bridge. The one it is personally engineering. Barenbana has no subtlety. It intends to keep its position for all the long centuries it is spending on an individual it is training to take its place. That, of course, is laughable, because even if I choose not to challenge and it succeeds, this new one will oust it long before Barenbana comes to the end of extending its own life.

At least Barenbana is aware not all knowledge can be programmed. I see it adjusting the young one's gem implants as it brings up 4D displays of its Emperor. It is explaining to the young one, some of the methods it employs in the engineering and training of an Emperor.

Vinctalites have psychological attachments. Barenbana calls this emotion. Barenbana over-analyses. However, it is getting to the facts that matter. This Vinctalite Emperor, like all of them, has been required to initiate a Chosen Son but unusually, he has chosen one he has a particular attachment to. Such an error on his part, renders training and punishment doubly effective, for although Barenbana has over-engineered this Emperor, thus weakening him to the point it risks killing him, compliance can be assured through the torture of a favoured Chosen Son. Thus, I am now observing a display in which Barenbana has the son on a bench, stripped, and is applying a poison via a talon. It is cutting deep into the Vinctalites back. The pain is immense. His cries echo through the chamber. The Emperor is begging. And promising.

So, Barenbana is leaving the young one to absorb knowledge while, at last, it takes note of the report I have prepared. Had it taken note of my urgency it would already have given orders to take this ship to that Emperor's headquarters instead of wasting time with historical data.

Finally, Barenbana is aware of a Tajat rebellion in the area of this world you, Halbolival, allotted to it. We are quickly under way but I fear Barenbana will apply further poor judgement by introducing training to the young one, in the midst of a serious operation.

The moment we set down in a highly developed Tajat area, the Emperor boards the ship. He appears concerned. He should be: there is one thing he has not failed in. He has followed orders by bringing his son.

In the lab the son strips, lays face down on the bench and screams as Barenbana applies its next painful inducement through the new wrist spike, gouging another long and bloody line down his back. Chenden has failed to stifle a gasp. He is now ready to act on Barenbana's orders.

'Get the Tendanny manufacturing rinjinjin as a priority, before all your Guards are on their knees. And begin harvesting the Tajats. Their organs should be in the strengthening chambers by now, not inside their bodies allowing them to even think, never mind attempt to survive.' He turns blithely to the young protégé, 'We have witnessed rebellious natures in Tajats before. You must be sure your Emperor can control them.'

Barenbana is a greater fool than I realised, Halbolival. It has given the young Vinctalin notions of personal power and worth. As the Emperor aids his son in returning to their residence, the young Vinctalin bounds down the ramp. It will be almost impossible for you to imagine, Halbolival, but we have a flight deck of shocked, gaping Vinctalin staring after it as it leaps off into the distance. It does not even break stride as Barenbana frantically activates one gem after another. Its head is aglow with activity but still the rogue, now lost to view, does not return. Barenbana is even considering going after it, I can tell. If it does it will disrupt even more severely, the running of the Royal Household. Only while Royals, Guards, Tendanny and even Tajats are unaware of us, unafraid of us, do they work efficiently for us.

Barenbana

I must report, Halbolival, that my Deputy has allowed a young Vinctalin to be lost. This may well cause problems with the harvest. I will have all under control, as you will be aware when you take this report from my implant. However, I will be forced to challenge and defeat my Deputy, regain the lost young one and train that as my eventual replacement.

May it be known that I did not personally engineer the irresponsible Vinctalin who has caused this disruption in a process that should be measured and methodical.

Pakow Lam Chenden

My son is regaining his strength. I wish Barenbana had more finesse. If it had it could torture me rather than my son in spite of my being extensively engineered and old. It could not risk killing me yet and so inflicted horrendous agonies on my son, as though I am not already doing everything within my power to get this situation under control. I fear what Barenbana will do when it discovers there are Tendanny who have joined the Tajat rebellion and that the dirty, primitive creatures crawling across this planet, have actually killed a number of my Guards.

I am pleased with this luxurious building located by my daughter, Pitlon Gowry. We rarely enjoy such comfort. I hardly dare think it, but if the rebellion spreads I am operating within a fortress. Eventually, the surviving Tajat population will be reduced to a containable labour force. I can, if it becomes necessary, kill the entire Tendanny strata, and still meet Barenbana's demands.

Ah, my son Fellen is rested. The rinjinjin has him regaining his strength. One more day and he will be back to normal. Pitlon's excellent computerised system is running smoothly, Barenbana has taken his ship and fellows back to their remote hiding place and I will re-establish control of my empire.

But wait! What is this! I will cull my Guards for allowing such gross errors in their ranks. Fellen is receiving the same report. Our eyes meet in furious agreement. The Guards, I can't believe this, have allowed Tajats into the building. This cannot be right! My implant is noting Guards inside the building being killed.

They are the fortunate ones. The punishment I will inflict on the survivors will be far more severe than anything they might have suffered at the hands of Tajats!

What is this now! I can hear them! The door has burst open! With no time to think or resist I am being pushed into a chair, as are Fellen and the rest of my family in this room. And we are being bound. How can they know how to restrain us? To move rapidly because had we not been in a state of utter disbelief, with our power we could break them like gerels? How can they be so well organised? How can they dare to do this to me? To me!

They are withholding my rinjinjin. I am weakening. I will not die at the hands of a Tajat when I have survived a lifetime of abuse from Barenbana. I will do as they ask. After Barenbana has regained control, it will kill me anyway but it will then have to keep Fellen alive. I will comply with the ignorant Tajats demand to bring the Vinctalin here. These Tajats can't begin to imagine what they have brought down on themselves.

Goranvilaz

I will admit that the Emperor given charge of this sector is well-engineered, with a family and Guards loyal to him. The error was in over-engineering. Even so, we should not be reduced to this. No, if Barenbana had killed Chenden and had Pakow Lam Fellen take his place, we would not be in this particular position of clearing up the mess of a Vinctalite!

Barenbana is leading the way, bounding, posturing, howling and roaring and the four of us follow in like manner. Each one of us is outraged, almost incensed beyond reason. We can hear our young sibling screaming to us. They have it restrained! They are not even worthy of knowing we exist, never mind restraining one of our kind. How they will suffer for this! I could almost laugh at the notion: rebellion.

I am close on Barenbana's heels as we reach the open entrance of a building once occupied by Tajats. Barenbana's novice has become aware of our presence. It has quietened to low growling. Barenbana's senses are no less keen than mine but it is a poor interpreter of sensory input. It does not fully realise the possible danger here. It does not, as I do, feel the need to turn and watch our rear as the last Vinctalin enters the building.

Tajats! Foul, dirty, weak little animals, are racing to attack the last of us to enter! How can they dare? Where is Chenden? I will kill that Emperor! My mouth opens, blind loathing erupts from deep within me; not a warning to my fellows, not a threat to the ridiculous subhumans, but a promise to that Emperor. Pakow Lam Chenden will pay more dearly than he can imagine, no matter how creative the terror he experiences.

They are organised, those ghastly, feeble creatures. They are armed only with knives the stupid, weak little beings, and working in teams, in pairs too. There are two trying to get the Vinctalin, last to enter, to raise its arms as they attempt to stab at the tender, unprotected areas of its armpits. Two more are employing the same method for the sensitive areas in its groins. Do they understand something about our physiology? How could they know that?

It is defending itself efficiently, naturally, against such insignificant assailants. Two agile little primates rapidly climb pillars either side of the Vinctalin. Can they really expect to damage its head? One falls to the ground as the Vinctalin spits acid into his face. While that takes his voice as well as his features it pulls the other male from his high position, grabbing a long blade in one hand whilst slicing a talon down his chest with the other. Still the remaining Tajats persist.

Now I find myself turning back to the sound of Barenbana's irate calls to its Emperor, demanding he bring his Chosen Son and kill the vermin daring to even try to strike it. I am forced to look closer to my own situation.

A group of the disgusting little creatures, with their rudimentary intelligence, expect to tackle me. Me! I am not so foolish as my fellow who is now fending them off, nor so slow. I spit. Though the acid falls short, and I won't believe they know anything of the range of that weapon, I can see horror in their soft, unprotected faces. Yet they do not cease their cautious advance. Enraged by their audacity, I leap forward to meet them, with all of my bio-engineered weapons deployed.

I am underestimating them. They seem to be aware of my vulnerable places and are harassing me to raise my arms whilst somehow dodging the poison-primed needles in my wrists that should be sinking into their abysmally thin flesh. While two concentrate on that, two more are trying to achieve the same with my groin areas. Take this display, Halbolival, see how I turn, rise and spin, to apply the toxins now engorging my heel spikes and talons.

I glance again, to my fellow who is under attack, expecting to see it in victory, noting my predicament and so preparing to catch up to Barenbana. It has taken a female Tajat by the throat, hoisting her off her feet to cut through her trachea, sending the thin, bright red blood spurting into its face, and now almost separating her head from her body with its pincers.

But here is a fresh shock and fury. It is bleeding. Its thick, purple, life-fluid pours from wounds in its armpits and groins. I ask again: how could they know of these vulnerable points in our suits? How could they know knives can penetrate the only areas not protected by subdermal shielding?

Finally, instead of batting the pests away, my Vinctalin is now spurred into more effective self-defence by pain, as well as wrath. It is slow in killing the remaining filthy Tajats there, and I am obliged to return my attention to the ridiculous little creatures trying to harm me. They are nimble and crafty. They are diving at me in a concerted effort, willing to sacrifice themselves in the hope that one of them will penetrate my unarmoured areas whilst, as yet, dodging all my bio-engineered weaponry.

I am containing the anger boiling within me. Pathetic though these aggressive creatures are, they are organised. And so, to some extent at least, I must take them seriously. I must develop tactics. You will laugh at that when you take this fact from my implant.

I have a method now: swinging low with talons, heels, then wrists, turning three hundred and sixty degrees, I can replenish the poison in each weapon. Any strike making contact will be lethal. Currently they are dodging away but they will tire. No Tajats in all the worlds we have harvested, ever possessed the extent of stamina our bio-engineering provides for us.

Occupied as they are now, I can assess the overall situation here. They have a leader. It requires little of my attention to identify the serious combatant amongst these precocious Tajats. He, the one with the darkest skin tone, is easily picked out from the swarming vermin. He is the one shouting orders. The one that hung back and led the attack on the last of our crew to enter the building. I can watch him only in brief glances and I see him spring, almost as agile as a Vinctalin though clearly with no engineering. He lands on the back of his target, shouting at his cohorts to keep my fellow's arms from rising to pull him off its shoulders.

He grapples against powerful Vinctalin hands rising in panic, and falling away as others sink blades into its armpits. The Tajat does not, as the Vinctalin does, vacillate over the next move. He is single-minded in his endeavour while the Vinctalin now struggles to protect both its armpits and the base of its crest. Only the crest matters but there is no defence of it without the use of the wrist spike with that Tajat clinging on, his legs clamped hard around my Vinctalin's hefty neck. I can guess his purpose but I can't believe it. Has he managed to gain knowledge of our crests? My head spins to our young one, fearing what I might have missed earlier and relieved to see no damage to the base of its crest. How could this Tajat have such data?

Our Vinctalin bucks and roars, trying to throw the man off its back, and shakes its head violently, cutting the hands of the man hanging on to its crest. It knocks the blade with its hard ridge but the man's grasp is sure. Whilst menacing this man on its shoulders it snatches up a female stabbing at its groin, snaps her spine and throws her to the floor. Stupidly it also strikes with the poison of its heel spike, wasting that on a filthy corpse. It then topples a male stabbing at its armpit and draws a talon across his throat. The severed artery pumps blood across the polished tiles.

This Tajat is aware of a race that he cannot win if he merely damages the crest. He has nothing to lose while I am losing faith in my Vinctalin.

The base of its crest is flashing blue as the dark Tajat gets his blade to it. By the time I can look back that blade has sunk deep. I have never witnessed anything remotely close to this in all the centuries of my life. Not even in the least honourable Vinctalin challenge have I seen a crest cut. And this, worse and worse, is close to stealing a dangerous portion of my attention because now, as he grinds his teeth, screams and yells, the Tajat is slicing along the soft base of my Vinctalin's crest. It's a lengthy process; time which is lost to me in the intensity of my own defence, until I am startled back to life by the Tajat triumphantly waving a detached Vinctalin crest as he leaps easily to the floor. My Vinctalin drops by his feet.

Dead. It is dead.

I have lost my rhythm but I will not allow the demise of one faulty Vinctalin to herald the end of me. I am an intelligent combatant. I lead the pack of Tajats trying to outwit me, to a space away from the turmoil and to

a place where I can be certain the single survivor of that fatal attack cannot turn his attention to me. While he takes stock of what he stupidly judges to be progress I re-establish my spinning, defensive routine. I am still unable to injure any of them though.

I can take stock. I can. Try. This is not possible! All surviving Vinctalin are under attack. Barenbana must be challenged after this! I will challenge it! I will win! And you will study this account now recording in my implant, Halbolival. There. Do you see even your named Vinctalin in a position where it resorts to fighting Tajats!

I can just see that the other in our group which was in danger of having its crest cut, has pulled its nemesis from its shoulders, tossed him around like a krantiva and sliced a poisoned wrist spike across his chest. But as that one falls to the floor, convulsing, the dark human has completed his assessment and aims for the weakest target.

He comes around from the back and vaults athletically on to this one's only recently freed shoulders, as he did the first. No time passes before he has our Vinctalin in rigor as he slices into the soft base of its crest, sinking the blade into the accretion brain.

A second Vinctalin is killed!

There will be no more!

I vow I will rid myself of these foul vermin and get to the aid of our third unnamed crew member, which already is spilling the deep purple blood that carries data from the accretion brain to its bio-engineered enhancements. It will have its weapons loaded with toxins. As I have mine.

I have made a strike. Though I have suffered also. In my groin. It is not deep in penetration but it affects my data input to the heel.

I had caught only glimpses of Barenbana's predicament. Until now. As I turn to check on it what I see stuns me anew. Barenbana is damaged. There is a leader among the group attacking Barenbana. He is shouting orders and my translation implant understands them, as does Barenbana's. Yet it is allowing itself to be manipulated by the Tajat wanting to isolate it in a narrow passageway, with three of his cohorts ahead and three behind. Still those ahead, that Barenbana follows so stupidly, know to remain out of range of its projected spittle.

A pale, thin Tajat, copying the tactics of the dark one, is somehow clinging to another's shoulders. Though the Vinctalin twists and bucks, cutting the flesh of the Tajat's hands on its sharply ridged crest, it is losing the fight against that combined assault. I cannot comprehend the persistence of a feeble Tajat whose hands are in shreds.

Satisfied that only four Tajats will not defeat Barenbana, I consider joining forces with my other surviving crew member. The Tajat, despite his torn hands, is growling self-support whilst actually slicing though the base of the crest. A prone, blood-soaked, lacerated female is

being pulled away from it by a male. He will join the fate of his female very soon. That Vinctalin might fail but I will not.

My other groin has been stabbed. Deeper this time. My assailants are relentless. I glance in Barenbana's direction when one of its attackers is propelled into the wall. It has taken out the leader of the group. Certainly it at least will prevail.

What is this! NO! The Vinctalin that fell to its knees has now crashed to the ground.

Barenbana is in serious trouble. There is a knife embedded in its crest base and its armpits are too severely damaged for it to raise its arms rendering it unable now to reach the soft flesh of the Tajats. Its bio-engineered weapons are currently redundant. Barenbana is reduced to employing its reinforced strength to hammer blows down on their heads and shoulders with the limited movement only its rage can muster.

Oh, I will take pleasure in killing the dark Tajat. I see him dash to the back of Barenbana, leap to a chair and from there on to Barenbana's shoulders. He has hold of the knife still in the crest there and is leaning in, using the power of his shoulder to force the rigid arm, hand and knife, as one, through the base of Barenbana's crest. Your Vinctalin, disorientated, staggers. Internal communications are broken. Its loud, autonomic attempts to control the cardiovascular system tell me also of the disruption in all its gem engineering.

It is reeling, Halbolival. It is reeling and squealing wildly, while still that one fierce Tajat, locked on to its shoulders, neck and head, sways with it, concentrating on his one aim. He is intent on only one action in all this chaos and ear-splitting noise. He is not for a moment distracted. He has the blade moving in heavy, jagged, sawing motions, until at last he has it severed and is waving it in triumph.

Only I remain to defend our claim.

The Tajat falls away, staggering and watching as the six puny creatures now having caught me in one armpit, are finally weakening. The screams and shouts of the humans are muffled in my head, the cacophonous cries of the Vinctalin have ceased but for my lone voice and that of the tethered young one.

My acid is not yet formed for spitting, none of my spikes is yet primed and as I reach to catch one human with my pincers another sinks a long blade deep into that armpit. I catch him and fling him across the room but the one I'd kicked away is crawling back, aiming for the groin once more.

I feel one of them land on my shoulders. It isn't the dark one. He watches. He is laughing. I roll my shoulders savagely while tossing my

head and cutting feeble soft hands locked to my crest. But raising my arms leaves open targets that are being rapidly ripped by blades.

I feel the first cut in the base of my crest. And throw back my head releasing a thunderous voice echoing far beyond this building. I stumble at the second cut. Fall at the third. My sounds are less powerful. Less strident. He laughs. I can't... I can't...

Pakow Lam Chenden

So, I did not die. I must get control, swiftly, in spite of my enforced weakness. How can they know to ration my rinjinjin to this level of effectiveness? How could they persuade Tendanny to join forces with them?

More than that, how can I endure this enforced march. Here I am, bound and being pushed along a primitive road by Tajats. Tajats!

I can't tell what Fellen is thinking. He has closed off communications with me. Why? He has never before been insolent. Why is he walking along meekly, as though he cannot use his superbly engineered strength and weapons to break these Tajats? Is he in fact, as enfeebled as I? He saw that they had defeated five, yes *five*, Vinctalin. Is he actually afraid?

For the moment, enough of the questions. I am contacting all royals my implants are able to locate. So few. So few.

I know of the ones killed in the palace by the wife now walking ahead of me. You think I will not punish you. You believe I, or Fellen, will be obliged to use you and your daughter to rebuild the royal household. You might believe correctly but you will never be favoured.

I believe my daughter, glorious, unconquerable Pitlon Gowry, is still free. I know that two of my sons have been shot out of the sky by the Guards I sent to punish and make an example of them. So, learn from their fate and be sure to follow the orders you are given when the time comes.

For now, those of you receiving this message must pass it on to others in the family and eventually to the Guards. Do not resist. They will keep feeding you enough rinjinjin to keep you alive. Otherwise, you would already be dead. They do not understand my bio-engineering nor Fellen's. I might not survive this but Pakow Lam Fellen will lead you well.

The responses are subdued. My family know nothing of the Vinctalin or mine and my Chosen Son's suffering under them. All beings here, royals, Guards, Tendanny and Tajats, are entirely unaware that more Vinctalin will arrive. They will take my son and use him to regain control of this harvest. Enough members of my family will survive to rebuild the Empire. No one can defeat the Vinctalin.

Wulpet

A Guy Edrich story.

Cacodaemus

I should have killed him when I had him at my mercy.

Celeste

Handsome? Of course. Hero? Naturally. Thirties? Probably. Righteous but not self-righteous.

Guy has developed talents that only a few of us close to him, understand. Then, only a little.

Jerome

Not a saint, but close. Not a knight, but closer. In fact, he has actually been knighted for saving us from the demons. Sir Guy. Lol.

Guy

I continue with the only purpose I know: that which I learned from my people, who labelled themselves Credentes L'Anglaise.

A Village in Suffolk, England. Twelfth Century

'They be fairy folk.'

'Fairy folk ain't green'

'Fairy folk ain't as big as children.'

Hmm, two green children in the wolf pit. Or creatures of enchantment?

'We should kill 'em.'

'A dying curse is worse than death itself.'

'These ain't ordinary children and they ain't ordinary fairies. We should hand them on.'

'To the Baron.'

'The Normans!' I spat at the notion and at giving them anything on top of my daily labour.

'They ain't speaking Norman.'

We held our breath, listening to their whispering. Two young green beings, fear-filled, desperately Prattling in a language we had never heard before.

'They scared.'

My companions nodded curious agreement.

'They scared of us.' I laughed. 'If they could curse us, they would not be scared.'

'We get help. With enough hands we can tie them and take them to Sir Richard. They might belong to the Normans.'

Our new masters were cruel. I had seen neighbours killed for producing a poor crop when the sun would not shine to ripen the grain. I had no idea if we'd be punished for taking these creatures to them; or punished for not doing it. I agreed to the plan because we'd as likely be punished for an odd occurrence on a Norman manor.

We were relieved when Sir Richard kept them, even though we feared the Norman would harm them, but we had no choice. What danger might we

find ourselves in by harbouring beings from another world. From the underworld, possibly?

This was the curiosity of a lifetime. As the years passed, they became known as the green children; as brother and sister, with no question of the supernatural. It was said they'd eat only raw broad beans. Village children would tease those amongst us that were partial to the vegetable.

Having accepted they were simply odd children, abandoned and left to survive on foraging the leftovers of our crops, we were saddened to hear that the lad was not flourishing. It was said that as they began eating other foods the children lost their green pallor. But I believe the boy lost something else as well. I believe the new, rich foods that he had never been used to, caused his sickness. He died within a few years of being found in our village wolf pit, but his sister grew healthier by the day.

I heard that the girl claimed they came from a land where the sun never shone. A twilight world, called St. Martin's Land. And that everything there was green. She said she didn't know how they ended up in the wolf pit in my village.

When they were allowed home for Christmas, Sir Richard's servants told us that he had her baptised, which was a thing the Normans would do to us, if we let them. That was part of the religion they brought with them and through their power thought they'd stop us practicing ours. As if we could stop hallowing something so obvious. And beautiful.

His servants who were obliged to work alongside the strange girl, described her as wanton and impudent. I don't know that she spoke their language before she spent time in Sir Richard's castle but servants from our village said she was soon conversing with them, as though she believed herself their equal. Certainly, I do know when I first heard her and the boy whispering it wasn't in the Norman tongue we'd become used to obeying, mostly through gestures and clear threats.

In time she liked their language and their religion well enough to marry one of them. That was the last I heard of her.

London, England. The twenty-first century

'They're aliens.'

Tez laughed nervously, trying his best to keep his imagination in check, 'Little green men don't look like children.'

Hmm, we'd survived the demon invasion and they were from another realm, so the gossip would have us believe. And those monsters were nothing like little green Martians. I tried getting a new grip on reality, 'Why would they leave these beings behind?'

'Demons disguised as aliens?'

'Crap aliens. They look like extras from a third-rate sci-fi movie.'

Tez fought to regain some kind of grip on reality, as it had become.

'Seriously Col, they're just scared children. That's all they are.'

'Oh please! Green scared children?'

I knew one thing, 'We can't leave them here. Jegger's gang might find them.'

'And when we try to get them out of that damn pit, we'll get bit, just like we did when it was a demon climbing out of there.'

I recalled, in a horrible nightmarish memory, how we'd tried to make defences against the demons. This had been just one of our pathetic attempts. Pits and walls proved pointless. They climbed up and down as easily as they moved horizontally.

But these, whatever they were, were trapped in the pit.

'We can't let Jegger get hold of them. You know what he'll do.'

They did.

'If we get help we can take them to the cops.'

'Or,' Tez's sudden excitement felt ominous to me, 'we could take them to Edrich.'

'Edrich,' I blew out the name I'd become sick of hearing. He had something to do with the demons. He probably did play a major role in defeating them. But, how did that make him less potentially dangerous to ordinary guys like us?

'Which is closer?'

'Edrich's flat is less than a kilometre, this side of the river.'

Closer than the cop shop and in the opposite direction of Jegger's territory.

I said, 'We'll need help.'

Tez was already skipping back to our gang headquarters. He wanted to do the right thing. And he enjoyed the adventure.

As much as I liked him, Tez was a bit of a prick. Like most of England, he hero-worshipped Edrich. He watched the knighting ceremony on TV, some months after the demons were eradicated. And he even tracked down someone who knew his address.

We were allowed into Edrich's block of flats when the man studied video of the green 'whatevers'. Tez sent it through his phone. Seriously, he nearly fainted when the bloke spoke to him.

'We knew you'd be the one to identify them, Sir Guy.'

Sir Guy! He had us out of his flat quicker than you could shoot shit off a shovel.

Sir Guy Edrich

The two beings that resembled human green children, crouched behind the sofa, straining against the rough ropes the youths had bound them with.

'They're scared.'

I glanced down to Celeste, standing by my side; as always sensitive yet not sensing a fraction of the confusion and fear, I knew gripped them.

I was in the process of mentally trying to identify the peculiar clothing they wore when Celeste pleaded, 'Surely we can untie them.'

'No.'

'Guy! They're terrified. The boy can't be more than seven.'

'They are not children.'

'What?'

She knew me better than to question that further. I sensed a maturity of being. Other qualities I could not properly identify, clamoured for my attention.

Celeste drew close to me, gripping my arm, breathing fearfully, '*What are they?*'

'That, I do not know.'

'Are they dangerous?'

I did not sense a direct threat. But danger of some kind accompanied them. 'No. They will be secure in our headquarters.'

I felt her shiver. She knew our dungeons were bare stone with nothing more than a simple toilet and foam mattress. And though green, they looked for all the world, like frightened children.

Jerome DeLanza

When Guy returned, he had me lock two of the oddest kids I've ever clapped eyes on, in the cells. He also brought Celeste to our headquarters. She tried offering the peculiar kids all sorts of food but they'd only eat raw, shelled broad beans, of all things. Fresh fruit and vegetables being difficult to get hold of, due to farming and trade being massively disrupted by the demon invasions, soon had her running short of them. Luckily, I'd made friends with a middle-aged brother and sister, who kept a good-sized vegetable plot. And, anyone who thought robbing a couple of quiet and friendly gardeners, were in for a surprise. Somehow Ava and Steven had acquired rifles. I knew they had contact with friends in various parts of Europe, some actually with private yachts, so I guess they'd smuggled them in.

I met them before the apocalypse, in my former life as a cartoonist, when I was earning good money and owned a modest house, close to their bloody great mansion. I hooked up with them again after the invasions. Basically, I needed somewhere to live. And they would have welcomed me, especially if I'd joined their little garden-protection militia. But there was a yearning within me, for something just out of reach. When Guy tracked me down, asking me to work for him, what I felt even more than relief was: I'm going home at last. Weird, right?

Anyway, the green kids wanted green beans and I had mates who could supply tons of them. So, I went and got some. Pleasing Celeste was generally near the top of my agenda. She'd been kind to me at a time I needed it most.

I was back in London, working under Guy's taxing regime, when he announced this new 'development'. As he called it. Very funny!

I tried getting a grip on what had become a new reality. As soon as Celeste had the kids settled, Guy gathered us to one of his meetings; the kind that involved him giving orders and us not arguing. My job was to check out any possible historical connection. Celeste's was to interview the people who found them.

At the next meeting Guy asked for Celeste's findings first.
'How do the youths describe their encounter with the beings?'
As always Celeste was succinct, 'Aliens. Naturally.'

Guy huffed.

Celeste met his eyes with stoic reserve, 'Well, they had been plagued by real-life demons. Alien feels mild in comparison.'

Guy sighed over a familiar aggravation, 'Creatures from another realm.' Celeste nodded. 'Exactly. Aliens.'

Guy quietly shared his own findings with us, 'The story from folklore is a garbled account, embroidered over the centuries, of a real event. If they were kidnapped, there were drugs of the day that could give them a greenish pallor, that later could simply be described as 'green'. There were different races meeting for the first time ...'

Celeste butted in, 'A herb that makes your skin green?'

Guy elaborated, to make his point, 'Or using a green pigment ...'

Again, Celeste cut him off, 'These children are green. Not painted. And not greenish. They're here. They're green. They bear a strong resemblance to a twelfth century narrative. And they appeared from nowhere.'

Guy dwelt on the fact she'd checked my history report. I could tell by the way he was looking at me. Meanwhile she continued smoothly, 'So, if they crossed a Boundary ...'

Guy finished for her, 'They would hail from another realm.'

'Thank you.' She reacted with her usual exaggerated peasant act.

Guy finished pointedly, 'If.'

When it came to my turn, I delivered this history report without interruption, thank frack.

The Green Children of Wulpet were known as fairies in folklore. The twelfth century monk and scribe, William Newburgh, wrote his account around the time of the reign of King Stephen (1135 -1154). He is regarded as a reliable historical source by modern scholars.

From miles around the monastery in east Anglia a large number of witnesses reported to him.

Edmund at the 'Wolfpittes' (a reaper from the village of Wulpet) was quoted by William Newburgh:

I saw a boy and a girl, completely green and wearing clothes of a strange colour and unknown material, emerge from the wolfpittes. They were crying and tried to run away but the villagers captured them and took them to the feudal lord, Sir Richard de Calne. He observed they behaved oddly. Abbot Ralph of Coggeshall continued the story: no one understood their speech. They were crying and wouldn't eat any food offered except beans

when taken from the pods for them. They lived in Sir Richard's house but the boy soon died. The girl grew strong and lost her green hue, learned to speak English, was baptised and worked as a servant in her benefactor's house until she married a man from King's Lynn in Norfolk. She said she came from a green world with green-skinned people.

She said that when they were still there, although it was far away, they could see this world. From their place they saw this world of brilliant light on the other side of a shining river or sea. One day she and her brother entered a cave they had never seen before and came to this land.

The people believed the Woolpit children emerged from the fairy realm and wandered into the world of mortals. At the time Christianity had only been established for a few centuries but ignorance, not travelling and being tied to labour on land, left them mostly adhering to their pagan beliefs.

Guy fell into deep thought; long enough for the two of us to wonder if he'd gone into a trance again.

When Celeste shuffled, preparing to leave the room, he came back to us, asking her a specific question. 'How did they know to bring them to me?' 'Tez was one of the kids I helped when we came back to London.' She steered clear of adding '*after the last demon invasion*' because she was tired of arguing.

But Guy had another equally, if not more, valid point to make. 'You told him where I live.'

She covered her stupidity with a defensive retort, 'He was scared and he worshipped you! He only stopped trembling when I told him you were close by. He knew your block of flats.'

He looked to me, knowing I'd get it, and then back to Celeste. 'What do you know of the one called Col?'

She attacked me, 'OK Jerome, what exactly have I done wrong this time?' I hesitated, anxious to stay on Guy's good side, yet knowing he would not explain it to her. 'Guy has enemies. They could get his address from someone like Tez or Col.'

Still being in a pleasant state of mind, thank frack, Guy only huffed, 'It doesn't matter. I'll stay here from now on.'

Celeste's expression told me she read that as a punishment. I decided I'd explain to her later. She understood Credentes better when I kept her informed.

After the meeting Guy spent some time observing the green kids while Celeste offered them all sorts of food before she settled for letting them eat only green beans, like the children of Wulpit did. That spooky scene sent me back to my art studio with a whole set of new ideas for my cartoons.

Guy Edrich

'They have complex language and it is not from this world. And they have not been brought here in any manner that the others were.'

I observe Celeste as her cogs whir.

'This may not be an intentional incursion. It could be merely accidental.'

'Then you are saying they're aliens'.

'Alien is a loaded term.'

She heaves out breath for a high-handed tone that has her thinking I regard her as a fool.

I alter my tone, 'Very well 'alien' may be used for the time being. The term is irrelevant.'

Celeste, however, cannot leave it at that. 'You were wrong.'

'I made no judgment.'

She sighs, but for once does not argue.

Relieved, I move along with my line of analysis, 'More than anything, we need to know if they herald danger.'

'Herald danger! Seriously? When the demons appeared they first came in dribs and drabs. Maybe the historical green children were scouts. Perhaps these aliens now know our realm has been hugely weakened by the demon invasions.'

My immediate concern, if I can't sense a breach in our Boundary, has me questioning if I am accurate in my judgements for protecting this world. I cast my mind to the furthest reaches of this realm. The Boundary is secure, but there could be other methods of arrival than even I am unaware of.

I must now question the possibility of creatures from another world, arriving here by means unknown to me. It cannot be through normal space in this time, since the various organisations fascinated with constant observation of the solar system would have been aware of their arrival. If that were the case my automatic monitoring system would have informed me.

I am allowing Jerome to spend the day working on his cartoons; it soothes him. Celeste, kindly uncomplaining, is providing our meals and continues to care for the two odd beings.

I have the cameras monitoring the cells and am absorbed in my surveillance when the enticing aroma of Celeste's perfume reaches me. Within moments I feel her halting at my back.

She watches my screen for a while before speaking. 'What are you doing?'

I push my notes to within her sight, aware they'd be incomprehensible to her.

'For goodness sake, Guy! Can't you just answer?'

Her familiar aggravation breaking into the long hours of tedious work, brings a smile to my face. I pull another chair close, patting it for her to sit with me.

This she does, simultaneously drawing my notes closer to study.

'Crumbs.'

'Yes.'

'Can you understand anything they're saying?'

I continue studying live images of the green beings, on my screen. 'I'm getting closer.'

She tries turning the notes upside down. I turn them back for her. 'I am using symbols because this language is not like any language I have ever seen, nor is it similar to the telepathic mode of communication used in my people's realm.'

'Crumbs.'

'Yes.'

Celeste sits back, regarding me with intimate knowing. 'We need a good night's sleep. And...'

She has my mind instantly diverted from this study. I switch off the machines, take her hand and lead her eagerly to our bedroom.

In the morning, both now relaxed, we meet Jerome's knowing smile across the breakfast bar in the kitchen area, equably.

'I discovered something.'

Jerome has my interest. Has he finally begun his own research, without my prompting, and direction? I motion for him to speak up.

'OK.'

He fears he'll fall short of my standards. I smile encouragement and watch him visibly relax.

'Yeah. So, two green children turned up in the Spanish village of Banjos in 1887.'

Celeste says, 'Crumbs.'

While I am trying not to be critical, Jerome adds quickly, 'I'll write a proper report. So far I've discovered there never was a village in Spain called Banjos.'

'How can you be sure?'

'Records about finding those children also tell us the village had never existed.'

Oh dear. That proves nothing, especially if they use the same source material. Or, it strikes me, if someone with power wanted to keep their existence secret. I recall Celeste's earlier concern: the early ones could have been preparing the ground for larger numbers. It could also be the purpose of these two being here, of course.

I say only, 'Did you find anything to tell us what became of those two?'

'No. But you've got to wonder why it's always two.'

'A boy and a girl?'

'Couldn't find that. All accounts only say, two green children.'

I feared the beginnings of confirmation bias, as well as of a theory I'd prefer not to be developing.

'1887?'

'Yep.'

Celeste's voice is quavering as she notes, 'Twelfth century, nineteenth century and now.'

I meet her lovely eyes with a confidence that I do not feel. 'Do you perceive a connection in time?'

'Well, no. Other than that they might have been building up to something for centuries.'

I am saddened to know that despite my efforts to prevent it, Celeste has reached a logical conclusion that heightens her fears. There is a certain amount of gaping as I explain my findings. 'I have a translation programme at last.' As it runs, I hear my own voice telling me of the whispered exchange between the unidentified beings. They are in a loop. The 'girl' constantly repeats, 'Where are they?' The 'boy' always gives the same response, 'I don't know what this is.'

'That's it!'

'Yes.'

Celeste's disappointment has my profound attention.

'That doesn't tell us anything!'

'On the contrary.' How much can I share? Or more precisely: can I avoid worrying her with this?

Again, it is Jerome who surprises me. 'Her question could mean they expected to find others of their own kind here.'

'What? Dammit!'

Poor Celeste. She suffers so, with her powerful emotions.

Jerome is feeling a growing power. 'And the boy is in an environment he doesn't understand. He could mean anything from that specific cell, to being in a human body.'

This pleases me. My smile of approval pleases Jerome. He won't lose that sense of pride when the responsibility that accompanies our kind, hits him.

I am reluctant to explain the part neither of them has realized. I am especially unwilling to involve the woman I love in a dangerous enterprise. Yet I can see no alternative.

'The one presenting as a girl, might be able to lead us to the others of their species.'

I so want to take her into my arms; to comfort her. Reading something of that, she reacts with feeling, 'I wish you could stay like this.'

Oh, so do I. There will be another brainstorm soon enough. A rush of chemicals, as another fresh psychic development grows within me as I continue my journey as something even greater than Parfait of the Credentes.

'We should appreciate the fact that I am settled at what could be a poignant moment in the history of this world.'

Jerome leans in, 'You're sensing something.'

'Yes.'

'Dammit,' Celeste breathes, as much for me as for the entire planet. Aware that time could be a vital element in this inquiry, I cannot utter the words I long to share. I will not give her this day and one more night with me. I will not have that gift for myself. And I will not tell her that I might have to stretch myself to breaking point this time.

Instead, I ask Jerome, 'Can you acquire more beans?'

She's trying not to cry, as I turn my attention to Jerome, nodding confidently. 'Thank you.'

Celeste sighs heavily.

Jerome DeLanza

Steven and Ava are asking awkward questions. They are probably only curious about the constant request for their beans, but my paranoia has me laughing it off and asking for a few carrots instead. I swapped them, as always, for one of my latest and best cartoons of the Prime Minister failing to organize the British farming industry.

Happily, Guy has given me the use of his Porsche, so I can drive out to Berkshire and my other best contact, for this mission anyway: Sally Fielding. She's fortyish I guess and young, I think, for leading a commune.

I went through a hippy phase, as my mother called it, after leaving Uni. When I lived in the commune, her father ran it. I'd heard he made it into his eighties before he succumbed to liver cancer, and that's when Sally took over.

Getting in isn't easy, but I finally persuade the guard on the gate to patch me through to Sally. She remembers me. I get invited in for tea.

Carrot cake is on the menu. It's her own and she remembers how much I loved it. That memory feels like a different life entirely.

Sally is friendly, kind even, but clearly waiting for me to get to the point.

I weave my question clumsily into the conversation when she mentions gardening. 'Have you still got the patch of broad beans.'
'Broad beans?'

I do my best with an effort at the casual smile. 'Just wondered.'
I can't read her expression. But then I can't be certain the old paranoia isn't back in force. I look around for one of my old, bothersome haunting creatures. There are none, thank frack.

'We have plenty of beans. Who are they for, Jerome?'
It would not have occurred to me to ask her that, if the shoe had been on the other foot. She's not questioning a change in my food tastes or asking why I'm not after my favourite carrots, she's not even worried that I might be entering a dubious money-making venture.

Guy has me pretty well trained though. I don't lose my thread but continue smoothly, 'It's the only ingredient my friend can't find for her new vegan hot pot. Don't worry if you can't help. It's just a thought.'

'No, that's fine. You can have a barrel full if you can keep them cold.'
'Sure can.' What a fracking relief. A new supply.

She has them loaded into the car. A warm farewell, along with waves from other old acquaintances, sets me on my way, and all I'm thinking is how pleased Celeste will be. That is until I become aware that I am being followed. Happily, back in busy London, Guy is sending me a convoluted route home, until I'm certain I have lost my tail.

Celeste Corsaire

This is heart-breaking. I can't help treating them like children because I have no other concept to work with. At the beginning I patiently persuaded them to sip water. Guy now thinks they didn't understand their bodies' need for water. He could be right. When I left a jug of water and glasses, they drank all of it. At that time Guy still had his human empathy intact. Using glass was stupid, but he didn't make me feel an idiot when he removed it. And he had the care then, to provide a stack of paper cups that I could fill and pass through the bars.

I only cry when I'm alone, remembering the compassion he had, and the love and care he showed me, before he had to allow his Parfait side to take over again. That powerful mind made contact with theirs, discovering they were alien even to his Credentes understanding. And this is awful to know as well. I realise this is more than knowledge. He *feels* what they feel: air on their skin, temperature, physical contact with matter and so on. Everything assaulting them through human senses, is agony to them. Besides this physical pain, they are coping with the trauma of trying to grasp a concept of time.

At least I can offer them some comfort, while Guy works on his theories. It seems that, for reasons he hasn't yet established and doesn't care to waste time on, they find comfort in the green beans. Jerome's a star. I have no idea how he constantly manages to find fresh supplies of these. Jerome is spending a lot of time down here with me, considering he'd rather be working on his cartoons, normally.

We're side by side, on hard chairs, facing the cell bars behind which the odd children continue their stoic poses, occasionally leaning in to whisper what I now know to be repeated phrases.

'You won't learn anything by watching them.'

Jerome turns to me with something of a Guy-like response, 'Of course not.'

'What I mean is, you don't have to stay.'

'Being here helps me think.'

Does he mean, being here with me?

'I wanted to talk to Guy but he's sinking into Parfait mode.'

I know that! It's all bloody awful again!

'We can be helping him.'

'Oh yeah? How exactly?'

'If there are others, and they pose a problem, who would they fear?'

I can see his point immediately. Guy is famous. And that for one thing only, 'The person who could defeat a demon invasion.'

'Yeah,' Jerome keeps his eyes on the prisoners, 'and how would they find him?'

I'm offended, 'I told Tez to make him feel better. I didn't tell anyone else!' Jerome is incapable of subtlety, but at least he tries, 'Can you think of anyone overhearing that, or that Tez might have told?'

'Shit!'

'So, who might Tez have told?'

'Well, he told Col and the rest of the gang.'

'Yep.'

'Oh crumbs!'

Jerome turned to watch my shoulders slump.

'Martin Taylor was always hanging around. He heard plenty of things I said about Guy.' I hadn't blatantly displayed my pride of my relationship with the hero of the world. But I should have been far more careful.

'Where's this Martin Taylor now?'

'He took a few of the kids out to Kent.' I feel better as I think more clearly, 'He's in his sixties and he's a redhead; very pale. Definitely not greenish.'

'Why Kent?'

Now I have a new concern. 'He's very political. He began a movement left of socialism and seriously green.'

Jerome smiles. 'That's too cartoonish to have a relationship with green aliens. I'll draw it for you though.'

My spirits rise with his, until I remember someone else, 'Oh heck.'

'What?'

'Sylvia Conors.'

'And?'

'Martin and I used to call her '*the witch*'.'

'We tried setting up a home in Dartford. It was a house Guy's people owned. Lovely old mansion. Loads of space for teenagers. Then they came across the old woman in her cottage nearby.'

'How old?'

'Seventies. And not green.'

He's chuckling now.

I don't want to spoil his good humour but I know this will, 'She did some sort of spells and threatened them. Tez was there at the time. I'm pretty sure he threatened her with Guy.'

Jerome has adopted Guy's method of long-suffering sighing.

'Tez came back with me, and Martin took the others to a place he knew somewhere near the south coast.'

'You should put all that in a report.'

'Don't you start!'

'It works.'

I'm not admitting it to Jerome, but I am going to do it. Guy might make some use of all this.

Guy Edrich

I sense these are to some extent, binary beings. I cannot, for concern of that, separate them, in order to attempt a psychic link with only one.

Celeste settles them with their beans. Jerome stands back. I believe he truly thinks he can drag me to safety if this does not go well. Poor Jerome.

Their whispering ceases as I approach. I note that, although they huddle together, possibly in fear, as I enter the cell, they do not shrink away from me. I am able, therefore, to stand close to them. This will afford me easier contact.

Their minds are in a state of flux and confusion. It is difficult, painfully so, to draw knowledge through their unfamiliar human senses. I suspect it is with foreknowledge of historical accounts of the children of Wulpet quite possibly, and any others, that I can discern some images, whilst being certain I am not imposing these concepts on them. As with those historical accounts, they saw beyond a bright river, a world of light. They found it enticing and desired to move closer.

They are not, in their natural state. They are, though, going through a period of change partly caused by contact with this realm and partly from our minds being magnified during the takoloshe incursion, bleeding into their domain, causing them to develop the concept of separate entities within the whole.

There are contradictions. I cannot allow the confusion if I am to keep my own mind working at full capacity. They take on human bodies when they arrive in this world. That is as much a mystery to them as it is to me. More than that, they take on the race of the humans they happen to find themselves amongst. I will allow a little analysis only of the major issue: they emerge here, curious and fundamentally peace-loving. Most telling of all, they are a grave danger to the people of this world.

I cannot allow that knowledge to steal my attention and prevent me grasping a little more information. They are absorbing some human concepts too. To them this place is enchanted and from human minds they have attached the word 'fairies'. That is odd. In fact, this is less of a one-way process than I am familiar with.

These two now are aware of the only facts I have of their kind: those in Banjos, Spain, that Jerome discovered. And the Woolpit children. In this near two-way conduit, I now understand that Agnes survived because she happened to adapt to this form of life, and not because Sir Richard Calne cared for her. Her brother died because he did not adapt. If this is information new to these two, here in this world, I have tapped into their hive mind.

Along with that is attached something of a shock. Over time many have entered this realm, crossing the river as they see it, leaving their twilight world for this place of light. But none returned to their home realm. 'Ahhh!' I am aware of crying out my pain and distress. Celeste moves close to the bars, fearing rightly, for my safety. They did not return because they remain here, in this world, and are still here now. And they are afraid of discovery. They are likely to fight fiercely for what they see as survival in a world where they know the apex predators are likely to want to kill them.

I must confess to amazement at Jerome's strength in pulling me out of the cell and to getting me up the stairs to my bed.

'Yes, Guy, I have locked them in.'

'Where is Celeste?' My words are miserably slurred.

'Soothing them with beans.'

'You must note down clearly what I've learned. I don't know how much longer I can remain coherent.'

'Yeah, I've got everything you said in there.'

'I have a little more.'

'OK.'

I cannot raise my head to check that he is writing this. I will have to trust him. That is not easy.

'They are from a twilight world where the atmosphere has been severely damaged. Only when individuals form and break away from the hive, do they feel compelled to cross the silver river. They take on our form but on arrival retain the green hue of their realm. Those who transition securely, soon develop the mainstream colouring and features of the society they find themselves in. Those ones fear being discovered by us. They saw the takoloshes destroyed and believe they'll meet the same fate.'

I pause to be sure Jerome has maintained pace with my speech. This next statement is most important of all.

'Amongst them are some who believe the only form of defence available to them, is to attack first; while the humans of this world are unaware of their existence and unable to identify them even when they begin the assault.'

Celeste Corsaire

I've been preoccupied with Guy's condition and trying to keep the children calm but I know they sense something. They're restless, possibly even afraid. I think they're expressing fear for what they now know to be a perilous position for their kind in this world, and that's probably added to their personal vulnerability, as they perceive it. The green beans I offer them are taken slowly now, as they peep up to me. Jerome thinks he senses them doubting my motives but I don't think his half-Credentes genes are capable of providing that ability. I knew Guy when he was in that same mode. He did not have that particular talent then. However, he was dealing with humans and demons. It is only in his current Parfait state that he can perceive far more in these newcomers to earth.

Jerome has been telling me there is growing unrest in London. Now, from my comfortable place in the lounge, I'm trying to watch three TV news channels at the same time as scrolling through online reports: big and small.

Guy warned us of course, before he went into freefall. The 'green children' that have been arriving here, only occasionally as we thought, and now indistinguishable from the human societies they live in, are scared enough to be dangerous. Especially to a world population that has already been savagely attacked by demons.

I now realise he reported accurately, of their need for attack as the only means of defence. The stupid thing is, if they would just keep a low profile no one would know who, or fear what, they are.

Oh heck. My search is now showing that the attacks are growing more and more widespread. Here on Twitter someone says their neighbours were attacked by other neighbours who have turned out to be

aliens. There are another nine similar ones. It's like people who resent their neighbours, now have an excuse to act out their dreams.

Oh watch out. This is an account from Washington State, coming on CNN. Oh heck! There are films from California, Arizona and Florida as well. People are falling to the ground outside crowded hospitals. And in the streets! Now I'm finding phone videos on social media taken from inside their homes. They're saying the tap water has been poisoned.

Jerome is back home! I am so relieved. Taking care of Guy is too much for me alone. Plus, he always settles a little when Jerome sits with him. They don't even talk. Well, Jerome does, but Guy says nothing. At least Jerome has him dressed and in an armchair with a cup of tea. He's even eating a sandwich.

This is ominous. Now down in the kitchen, Jerome has insisted on making me a cup of tea. Obviously, he has something to tell me.

'I listened in on other people's conversation. Everyone's as agitated as hell. I've even seen gangs of kids rampaging through the streets. Don't you go out there.'

'No, I wouldn't dare.' I'm putting away the food he managed to get. It's very plain and not nutritious. Guy would be angry if he saw this.

Jerome's voice breaks through my thoughts. 'Gossip is spreading.'
I'm looking at the poor, flat, rough bread, 'It always does.'

'Some say there's something alien going on.'

'Well, at least they're not saying demonic.'

'Not quite. Mostly the word paranormal is used.'

I stop to give him the attention he needs. 'And?'

'I remember you talking about an old woman who was accused of being a witch. That kind of thinking stays in a community.'

'Oh. Sylvia. I hadn't given her a single thought.'

'Yeah well, a lot going on.'

'You think being taunted as a witch will come back to haunt her?'

'Not funny.'

'No.'

'I should check on her.'

'You can't do anything on your own. Call the police.'

'Are you kidding? They're trying to keep themselves, their families and their friends alive. Whenever they try to break up a mob, they lose.'

'Lose?'

'Yeah. Ruddy great cops in body armour and helmets carrying rifles.'

'Crumps!'

'Yeah.'

'So? What are you planning?'

'I'm going to drive down to Sylvia's alone, that way I won't attract attention. I'll bring her back.'

'You can't bring her here.'

'I reckon she's OK.'

'But we don't know. Guy wouldn't allow it. She could even be one of them. If I give you the codes, you could take her to Guy's flat. She'll be safe

there. There is even food in the freezer.' As I put the bottled water away, I think of the news from America, 'She should only use the bottled water. Ration it.'

'Right. I guess I'll take the Porsche.'

Jerome DeLanza

So, I've reached Sylvia's weird little cottage without attracting attention. Even the crowd around it haven't noticed my car. I can see at least seven people. Some have already managed to get inside. They've left the door wide open.

They're yelling abuse: stupid accusations of her being the cause of someone's death. Obviously, she is in danger but what the hell can I do on my own? Guy would wade in, punch a few, and the rest would run off. They're only ordinary people, not thugs. Then again, Guy is big, strong, highly trained in unarmed combat and authoritative. I'm not.

I can't sit here while they rip the poor old woman to pieces, so I step out of the car and yell.

'She's a harmless old woman! Leave her alone!'

It's loud enough to get their attention, so I follow it up. I take on a cartoonish Guy-type persona.

'You are breaking at least three actual laws and any number of moral codes!' It's the kind of thing Guy would say, and it has the same kind of effect he would have, which is merely to get their attention away from their prey.

They're looking at me like a cat that eyes up the chick that fell out of the nest.

Naturally, I slip back into type. 'Look. She's my Gran.'

Thank frack she isn't really. 'Let me just take her away for you. You'll never see her again.'

One of them starts spouting garbage about distance not mattering to witches but another tells her to 'shut up'. Someone else gets hold of her arm and yanks her away, 'Come on, Jane. We shouldn't be mixed up in this rubbish.'

Another is pushing two older people off down the path, 'Mum, Dad, there's a witness here. What are you planning on doing? Killing him too?'

A few are still there but they're only grumbling, so I stride, well try to, closer.

I was always good at lying, 'You're on my property!'

'What?'

'I own this place. And I just called the police.'

The swearing is colourful, and I'm being effective. They're moving away from the house. Towards me.

'They said they'd get here within minutes!'

I get called by some choice epithets.

'I don't even want to describe you to them. Get lost, I'll take my Gran, and we can all look after our own without police involvement.'

Two men emerge from the open doorway when called. They're shoulder-slapping one another as if they've just come up with a great life-saving plan and walk away. I feel like I'm going to faint but am comfortable it doesn't show.

I'm not slow either. As soon as the path has all of them winding into the trees I nip in, show Sylvia the note Celeste quickly scribbled, and tell her to come with me.

'No, you can't bring the cats or your fracking baskets of herbs, Sylvia. We'll be lucky to get to the road in one piece as it is.'

A bit of manhandling gets her into the car, sans any pets or accoutrements.

Even on the road going to London we are witnessing a variety of nightmarish scenes. I have to reverse out of an incendiary situation, tires squealing, before reaching the quieter area of Guy's apartment block. I am as relieved as hell when the code works on the basement parking door. And again on the internal door into the building. Again, all the way up the stairs. Daren't use the lift no matter how the old bat begs. And again, when the code to the flat works.

Only when we're inside with the door shut and the lock checked, can I relax. Sylvia's heaving for breath and rubbing sore joints. She'll get over it.

I'm only just sitting down and my mobile's ringing. It's Celeste. I begin telling her I've got Sylvia here safely, looking forward to the praise, when she buts in, telling me about one of the youths that went to Kent with Martin Taylor. He phoned her, saying the group has been attacked and he's on a motorbike, hiding somewhere and terrified. She's given him the codes for this place. So, I can expect company. Great! Not!

So, the kid's turned up. He's OK. We're both checking news reports on our phones and trying to ignore Sylvia's odd facial expressions. Violence is erupting all over the world. It's crazy. Police are being attacked in larger numbers in Russia, which I suppose could be understandable. But cops trying to control rioters in Holland, being killed by some sort of gas is bloody shocking. I'm gaping and showing it to Sylvia and then Gavin. I have to look again to see that neither seems to care.

When Gavin shows me his phone, I see something even more shocking. He's watching live streaming of UK armed forces, personnel in the army, navy and Air Force, attacking their fellows. They're killing each other! What the hell!

'Some kind of psychic control?'

I'm staring at the boy. I hadn't even thought of that. I'd assumed some were once green. This suggestion could mean that there weren't that many of them. But the relative few there were, had one hell of a fracking weapon.

Celeste Corsaire

The green children are losing some of their colouring. I feel concerned about how they are changing; not because I fear they'll become like the killers who have lost the green pallor but because I think they might become scared of me. There seems to be a mental connection with all their kind worldwide: they're rising up in unison just as the children told Guy they might.

I am not afraid of these children. Guy, and even Jerome, would caution me against entering the cell, but I know them, and they know me.

As I close the door, noting they have never even tried to harm me, they look eagerly to the bowl of green beans I have with me. I arrange our stools in the usual triangle and hold out the bowl to each in turn. The boy takes one, and only one, eagerly. The girl follows.

Because they had communion with Guy, I am hoping they'll find a way to interact with me. I'm making an effort to relax, which is an oddly contradictory effort. However, something is coming through. 'Your imagination,' I hear Guy's scathing judgment in my head.

Wow! The image of something in my head, with Guy's powerful emotion connected to it, has set something off. The children are trying very hard to speak to me. They're trying to warn me about something!

Jerome DeLanza

Sylvia seems to be sleeping well. I peeped in on her. Gavin finally went to bed at 2 a.m. He was wide awake when I looked in on him but he stayed there and remained quiet when I shushed him. It's 3 a.m. and I'm not vaguely sleepy and the TV news is showing worldwide atrocities. I've got the sound off and subtitles on. I'm genuinely trying to be what Guy wants me to be, which definitely includes protecting Sylvia and Gavin as much as I can.

The tragic fact is that the world population, already reduced by the demon invasions, continues to grow smaller and smaller. And there is no evidence, not even the tiniest fracking hint from the biggest fracking lying of world leaders, that a single fracking alien has been identified, never mind killed. There are human bodies everywhere, going unburied: film of them in the streets of New York to the beaches of Australia to the fracking South African townships and here in the country villages of England. It's total bloody anarchy!

OK. Taking a big breath. Not total anarchy. People are filming this. TV stations and Internet bloggers are broadcasting it.

And I'm getting a powerful urge to be the one to do something to mend all this. Guy saved the world last time. But I'm not Guy.

Of all people, Ava's name comes up on my buzzing phone. I have just realised that in all this widespread mayhem there are either a hell of a lot of humans that can turn murderous at the drop of a hat, or there are a hell of a lot of more of the peculiar aliens here, than we thought. So now, of course, I'm scared to answer it in case she is one of them. Suddenly, her crop of green beans takes on a very different possible purpose. Why would she contact me of all people out of the blue? If she is one of them,

could she sense Guy through my Credentes psyche? After all, the green kids had a very strong reaction to him. I'm going to ignore it.

Bugger. She's leaving a message. I feel like I could get hexed if I even look at the message. Could she know where I am through that? I have no idea what they can or can't do.

OK. OK. OK. If I leave the phone here and take Gavin and Sylvia somewhere safe, they won't be able to get to me. No point in going to the cops, even if they would listen to me. There's only one place I can think of. Sally Fielding will know all this is going on and she'll have sympathy for an old woman and a boy. She'll have plenty of food and they only drink water from rain barrels. I'll drive there now, leave them safely with Sally, and get back to sort Guy out. Somehow.

Guy Edrich

Words and images dance over one another. Blinding light, flashes, a black void. Pain. Agony. Searing, burning. Pokers in my head. My voice, distant, crying out.

And a soft voice calling my name. 'Guy.'

Rolling, grating, swimming.

'Guy. Wake up.'

Falling. Falling.

'Guy? Please!'

Drifting.

'Wake up now, Guy. You need to come back to this place.'

Floating.

'Come back to me, Guy.'

The face is blurred. Yet familiar.

'Well done, Guy. Stay with me now.'

Clear blue eyes. Pretty, kind eyes. Love. Security.

She lifts a hand to my cheek, 'Feel solid flesh, Guy. You're touching me with your physical hand. You are in a human body. Can you hear me?'

'How long?'

'Three days.'

That is not good.

'Do you remember, Guy?'

'Different.'

'From what?'

'Any other times my mind...'

'Do you know why?'

I want to sit. I feel vulnerable.

'Keep still, Guy. You'll make yourself sick.'

Oh, yes. Nausea.

'That's right. Keep still. Give yourself time.'

'I feel...'

'Confused?'

Much more than that. 'Yes. And...'

'Out of place?'

Misplaced. Yes.

'You always do, after you've expanded your consciousness.'

'This is different.'

'How?'

She's right. Keeping still helps. 'Not the usual place.'

'A different realm?'

'Yes. A new one. In danger.'

Celeste Corsaire

I am strangely sad to see their green colouring fade, curious to watch their hair take on a fair shade and their eyes a blue tint, and positively alarmed by the rapid changes that follow. In little more than two days they have very pale complexions, clear blue eyes and strawberry blonde hair.

But it's Guy's observations that worry me most. 'They have developed an appearance that matches yours. There will be a purpose to it.'

For a moment I think I have it covered. 'I spend the most time with them. They're bound to associate...' My voice trails off. I can't think what I'm missing.

'My joining with them was far more profound than your interaction. Their minds are not simple. Their observations complex. They are aware there are a number of sets of features for individuals of a race. Others have taken on a variety of features in the past, whilst fitting in with the local race. To emulate you personally must have a purpose.'

'Maybe they just like me.'

He studies me very closely before turning his attention to the children. Guy doesn't shift his eyes from them, as he adds, 'Their purpose is not bound to be negative.'

'Oh! Thanks a bunch! You didn't think to mention that before scaring the life out of me!'

'I have told you, many times, that if you would apply logic prior to reacting, you would save yourself a great deal of anxiety.'

My heart, which is racing from fear, picks up speed with a familiar reaction to anger precipitated by his arrogance.

As Guy completes his appraisal of them, and I feel him telepathically brush through my mind, which he's promised never to do, he gives me his full, human attention.

'Sorry, but I had to be sure.'

'You promised!' I want my outrage to be expressed but even I can hear the pathetic quiver of sorrow in my voice.

'I really am sorry, Celeste.'

'Yeah.'

He didn't even wince over the poor vocabulary, as he called it. 'I had to know. And I do.'

'What?' At least my curiosity dominates my irritation.

'They are trying to communicate with you.'

'Wow!'

'Yes, and ...'

The fearful tut bursts through my tongue and teeth. 'For goodness sake, Guy. And what?'

'Their speed of change suggests urgency.'

'Oh heck!' I feel as cross for needing to be told that as for the questions it raises.

'You have to hear what they need to tell you.'

There's a childish whining in my voice. 'OK.' I'm trying to be brave. 'How?' He doesn't know the answer to that any more than I do, but he's still got the superior expression. Sometimes I ask myself why I love him so.

'Sit with them as you normally do. Don't try to engage with them but empty your mind.'

'I've never been able to do that.' Attempts at meditation have always left me frustrated. He knows this.

'Just try.' The sigh is a criticism. It's not helping me to relax.

And so, with no more instruction, encouragement or sympathy, he leaves the basement! I note he is now quite steady on his feet.

Jerome DeLanza

Guy won't accept that he needs to rest but by applying the logic that he uses, I manage to get him to lean back in the big easy chair and close his eyes. I have to hope he's not using energy scanning the entire fracking universe, instead of emptying his mind in the way he expects Celeste to be doing.

He won't eat lunch with a plate on his knee, so I've been setting the table while I'm cooking. He looks very peaceful but I won't have my cooking wasted. I have to shake him to bring him round. He's glad of the food though.

Now, clearing the table, Celeste arrives and I motion for her to sit while I put a plate of beans on toast in front of her.

She's stuffing it in and talking with her mouth full. It's bound to get Guy going.

'They're here because their world is dying.'

She's chewing heartily, and crossly, and no doubt, giving herself indigestion. 'They're just trying to survive.'

Guy sighs. 'Obviously.'

She deliberately stuffs more in and wipes juice from her mouth with the back of her hand. Guy turns his head away. Angrily. I'd laugh if this was less serious.

'And they want you to know something else.'

Now he's interested. Celeste smirks and scrapes her plate.

'That is childish.'

'Would you like me to leave?' What ranks as foreplay for them, is way out of place in these circumstances.

Celeste's smiled apology settles me. She's the sweetest person I know.

'Nothing's simple.'

'It never is,' I respond with feeling.

'They seem to be saying they're not all the same, just like we are not all the same. They wanted to know if some humans can be vicious, some gentle, some stupid,' she flings her hands around in her habitual gesture of complex ignorance. 'In their normal state, in their home world, there is rarely a split from the collective mind...'

'Collective mind?'

She doesn't like the interruption. She was preparing to say something important and he's bothered about a term she used for want of a better one. I can't imagine how she copes with him on an intimate level. Part of my mind is conjuring very crude cartoons of their lovemaking, but that's cut off with her next words.

'They're aware of the descendants of the historical arrivals, as well as many new children arriving.'

Guy is leaning in, urging her to be quick and clear. But Celeste's attention is on me.

'What?'

'They can identify some of them.'

She clears her throat but still I can hardly hear her words, 'Sylvia, Sally and Gavin, definitely descended from their race.'

Bloody hell! And I'd helped the three of them get together. 'What! I thought Ava...'

'They didn't name Ava. I guess that doesn't mean...'

'Why the frack do I always get betrayed!'

Guy is aggravated. Of course. But when he sits back to take note of Celeste, instead of me, he realises there's more. She's shocked rigid now and can hardly speak.

He manages to be more gentle. 'Do you want to speak it aloud or would you like me to...'

'Hell no! Guy! You're not invading my mind again!'

'Alright.'

She takes a deep breath, as he takes her hand across the table.

Her words emerge in a whisper, 'Their world is dying from the long-term effects of something the ancient arrivals here, had done prior to leaving. They're going to do the same here. The rest of the trouble they're causing is just for fun, basically.'

Even Guy gasps.

Obviously, I didn't expect that. 'Bloody hell,' my voice is almost lost.

Guy Edrich

I had sensed none of that. Has her imagination played a part in this. I have to know if it is true. If that is the case, I must have more details.

This is awkward. And ridiculous. This world could be in danger at a time when the population is made up of survivors from a horrific mass incursions of what to them were flesh-eating and mind-reading demons. I will try asking first. 'Celeste, may I seek direct information from your memory?'

Naked, glistening, face-down in my bed, she raises her head high enough to speak clearly, 'What? Are you kidding?'

'I apologise for the poor timing.'

'Honestly, Guy! We've just...'

I cut off the crude word, but it echoes in my head all the same, 'Please. You know how important this could be.'

She throws herself on to her back, as though submitting to a grotesque violation.

Nevertheless, I am able to reach into her memories. I feel less of a monster as I lay down by her side and take her hand.

Cruising through Celeste's memories is always complex. As well as her fertile imagination she has a great deal of fiction from a wide variety of media. However, the voices of the beings from an unknown realm, have a clarity. A distinct flavour.

I push past the pain of their condition, as well as the fear they induced in Celeste.

Oh, those descendants from the ancient refugees, few are united in their purpose. And, oh Celeste this is the source of your horror, those two that you call children have incidentally formed a conduit allowing the others to leave traces of themselves with you. Some wish to create chaos amongst the humans here, from which they expect to grasp order, control and power for themselves. While others are simply malicious. Those are the ones intent on destroying this place, as they did theirs. They know of another realm where they intend to repeat the process once they are finished here.

She has no more specific information than that. As I withdraw, I gradually realise she is crying softly. And am distantly aware that she wants me to hold her.

However, there is no time to waste. My showering is quick and thorough. My drying vigorous. And my dressing interrupted by Celeste. 'Where are you going?'

I have no idea. But she means physically. I can allow no risk of disturbance.

'To the study.'

'Don't lock the door.'

I intend to.

'Don't, Guy. We won't disturb you until we're sure you've finished but we'll need to get you to bed after.'

In the study, I stop myself locking the door. Just. I choose the armchair, lean back and summon the mind of one called Sylvia. Oh, she enjoys seeing people in pain; physical and emotional. She's amused over hiding her true self from others. Even those that Jerome protected her from, had no idea of true nature. She found it hilarious when she saw him working so hard to rescue her. At the first hint of her feeling my presence, I move on to the next. Gavin is delighted to know that any contact humans have with him, leaves them feeling oddly sickened. And rather than indulging this joy along with the pleasure of any misfortunes they face, he

dwells on the triumph of the deception. Celeste is not the only human to have been manipulated by him.

Again, I must move on. Sally's malicious enjoyment is taken, at least in part, from her long association with Jerome. She is aware that he trusted her, indeed still believes he does, over Ava and Steven. She intends to make use of that by causing Jerome suffering she hasn't yet decided upon. Going through a variety of vicious possibilities occupies her mind. I leave her now. Before she can become aware of my presence.

They cannot entirely discard their original nature. I now have something of a route into the minds of others of their kind. The first is rejoicing with a total lack of remorse, over the fruitfulness of the disaster they left brewing in their realm.

Now I see that place. Green of course. Green atmosphere: a thick soup, roiling in horror, terror, despair and with individuals emerging from it, searching for egress. Their normally tranquil pool is in turmoil. Only now are they aware that those who emerged as individuals left some long time ago, after trying to alter that place in order to have every part of it split into individuals.

Here in this realm, where they take on human form, they have grown strong, living on in their descendants more exactly than natural human breeding produces. Though they appear human they are not much like them. Yet they can imitate them very well, drawing them into friendships, intimacy even, for their own use.

But, as with humans, there is also good to be found. One major divide stands out. All those descended from the ancient breakaway individuals exhibit negative personalities, while many of the more recent arrivals regret the damage they bring with them. They, like the two in the basement here, far from wanting to rule over earth, cause disruption and pain, or find amusement in the disaster befalling this realm, are trying to help. They co-operate with my incursion, welcome my presence, and even express gratitude for my desire to help.

And they warn me: those seeking total destruction are working assiduously on achieving that before I can stop them. I won't allow the shock of having been identified in spite of my caution, to curtail this process.

In fact, this is an excellent development. Though they fear I can stop them, I have no idea how I might achieve such a feat. Neither do the fresh green ones. Or even the descendants of the ancients who want to live on in this world. But I have put them on the back foot.

Celeste Corsaire

'You're stronger than you look, Jerome.'

'Yeah, amazing what strength you can find when you're only hope needs carrying up the stairs.'

'I took the feet!'

'Yeah.'

I've never seen him unconscious for this long. It seems like weeks since we made love in that bed.

Jerome thinks he's taken charge. I can't tell if his Credentes side is growing in strength or if he's hoping to please Guy when he comes round. If he comes round.

If I had any humour left, I'd laugh at him. Instead, I'm sitting at my computer, supposedly writing a report from my point of view of what we know so far, while he's at his workstation doing the same. I've never seen him appear so earnest. Maybe he can actually do something useful here.

I bloody well hope so, because these phone videos and accounts all over social media, are terrifying. You'd think, after all this world has been through, that people would pull together. But no, there are morons here talking about how they got revenge on old enemies. Seriously, this one has settled an old score with his next-door neighbour, by setting fire to his garden shed. Another has poisoned her friend's cat because it once bit her.

Others, more ambitious ones, are boasting about setting off riots in order to steal and I quote: 'the telly I always wanted', 'half a dozen iPads to flog later' and 'I thought I'd never be able to get a pair of those shoes'.

Most of them are out in the streets hurting each other in an attempt to prevent their becoming victims. In the process, of course, they're making themselves into targets. And this is only UK towns and cities.

The rest of Europe is pretty much the same, as far as I can tell, Russian, Chinese and American troops are shooting civilians, and people all over the world are seeking remote locations to hide in.

There is an old couple here, filming this live, trying to tell a bunch of neighbours that something is making them all do this. You'd think that having seen the world invaded by demons, would make them listen. But no. Someone's grabbed her phone and I guess it's being smashed. No idea what they're doing to the old folks now. I don't even want to guess.

Jerome is still in his natural successor role.

'Finished yours?'

'All done. Must be supper time.'

'OK.'

He's suspicious. I guess I agreed to everything too easily. 'Yeah. I'll put supper on, then check on Guy. Ready in half an hour.'

'Great. I'm starving.'

I hope he doesn't check for my report as soon as I leave the computer suite. I don't want him getting in the way of my immediate plan. Such as it is.

Supper is cleared away in an hour. It's still early but I'm going to lie with Guy. I need to feel his heart still beating. Other than that, I have no hope for anything or anyone. This world can't survive another onslaught.

'Celeste.'

Oh my lord! Is that him! 'Guy?'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's OK. I'm fine.' I have to swallow away the lump and wipe the tears from my soaked face. Strong emotions disturb him. 'Are you OK?'

'Weak.'

'Keep still. I'll get some tea.'

'No. Thank you. I need only to rest.'

'OK.'

'But I must tell you something, in case...'

Somehow I steady my voice, 'Guy just rest. Later you can...'

'One thing. Then I can sleep.'

I clear my throat as quietly as I can. 'Alright but promise me you'll sleep after.'

'I promise. I will be able to sleep naturally, with a clear conscience.'

Jerome DeLanza

Celeste is in with Guy. He was out cold when I checked. She could be lying next to a corpse for all I know. The world is buggered.

Hold on. I can hear her coming out. And I'm stuck on the bog. How stupid is this! I always get the runs when she cooks!

Where the hell did she go? I'm searching kitchen, lounge, computer suite, spare bedrooms even, before going to the cells where I expect to find her. The kids look at me like I'm nuts. She's not here. Maybe the archive room. No! Surely she hasn't gone outside!

Maybe Guy needs medicine. I rush to the underground car park, preparing a wordy reprimand with a merciful offer to get whatever it is Guy needs.

Huh, the Porsche is gone and she hasn't even locked them up properly. No one can get into this fortress when it's secured. I do what Guy would expect: squash my instinct to look for her outside and lock everything properly.

Now I have to check on Guy. I'm fearing how bad he must be for Celeste to run the gauntlet like that.

I don't knock, in case he's just dozing off. Instead, I open the door a crack and creep in. Despite my efforts, I have disturbed him, but he settles back down from where he raised up on one elbow.

Keeping my voice low and clear, I ask, 'Are you OK?'

A grunt tells me he thinks he is. I can't tell him Celeste has gone out there, for fear of stressing him.

I pull a chair to the bed and sit where he can just turn his head if he wants to see me.

'Do you need anything?'

His voice is broken and cracked when he asks me to help him sit up. He's heavy as hell but I get him propped up on pillows.

'Sure you're OK? Don't need medicine or anything?'

'No. I'll be alright in time. Where is Celeste?'

Frack. 'Um. In the bath I think.'

'Jerome. Tell me. Did she go outside?'

He'll get it out of me sooner or later. 'Yeah.'

'In the Porsche?'

'Yeah.'

'Good. She'll be safe in that.'

She should be. It was my favourite because it was armoured.

'Do you know that the Jeep is also armoured?'

No! He never told me that!

'But don't go after her Jerome. She isn't coming back. She'll be safe where she's headed.'

Obviously, I want to know where she's gone and why. But mostly I'm glad I don't have to rescue her.

'What do you want me to do?'

'I am sorry Jerome. It is something you will fear greatly.'

Frack! Bloody typical! 'OK. What?'

'You must kill Sally Fielding.'

Celeste Corsaire

I'm going through ideas of what to say to Gavin and Sylvia when I reach them in the town they told Jerome they'd moved into. And not getting far. I got the idea that after Jerome met them in Guy's flat, he discovered something he hadn't shared with me. Probably something he's embarrassed about and I don't have the time to work through all those possibilities. So, I choose simply to follow Guy's instructions but they're bound to want an explanation of some sort.

Well, I'm here, they're looking confused, and this is the best I can do, 'Things are getting really rough. I'm going to a peaceful village in Suffolk. Do you want to come with me?'

They both agree eagerly. I can't decide whether to worry about that or resent the fact they're not expressing much gratitude considering how pleased they are to be going there.

They both sit in the back of the car. Gavin seems particularly satisfied to chat with Sylvia. I can't hear all that they're saying, and I am trying. Sort of. I'm too worried about Guy to really care. I don't know why Guy chose Wulpet in particular but I'm glad to be going somewhere that is tranquil, where I can walk down the street in the fresh air.

This is proving an easy drive. I'm way over the speed limit but even the motorway wombles have been co-opted into the police force, for peacekeeping. So, I won't get caught.

Satnav tells me we'll be there in ten minutes. I relay the update to my passengers. There's silence, and I know they heard me. Rude or weird?

The Satnav directs me to the B & B I Googled while I was driving. As we enter the country lanes my mind is working through a scenario of Guy lecturing me about using my phone while driving.

Excitement in the back alerts me to the village entry sign: Wulpet, Home of the Green Children. Oh, that's where I heard the name before. Guy would not have chosen this place by coincidence. He never forgets

anything. He might think this is the least likely place for ‘them’ to cause trouble. It’s OK anyway. He’ll have a good reason. He always does.

The B & B is gorgeous! It’s a quaint stone house. Flowers in pots at the front and a little courtyard garden at the back. It’s called The Well because it’s close to the legendary well of the Woolpet children. It’s a place I’d have loved to have found for a holiday, in the good days. I feel great. Sylvia and Gavin our excited to realise how lucky they are, at last. We’re going to have a beautifully quiet historical time, as well as being away from danger. It is perfect. Even in his terrible state, from massive self-sacrifice, Guy thought to give us this. Of course, I love him.

The B & B lady is sweet. Her husband is shy. My room is cosy and very comfortable. Sylvia and Gavin have the other two rooms on this floor. Apparently, there are two more rooms in a loft conversion.

I’m taking one of my precious sleeping tablets. I’ve no idea how Jerome gets hold of them. He’s becoming a right little wheeler-dealer. He’s a very sweet man. Lol, he blushes when I tell him that.

Breakfast is delicious. I’ve eaten too much. How ever have they got hold of all this? I guess the eggs, tomatoes and mushrooms are local. But bacon and sausages? If Guy saw this he’d want to trace the racket, make it legitimate, and share out the food. He always tried to counter that when he found it in London. He couldn’t stop it, so he bought almost all that was going, at a high price, and passed it on to trusted local grocers who would sell only at affordable prices, so everyone in the district could get a treat. I can’t believe I called him a commie. Doesn’t matter. He didn’t care. He said it was about love and kindness; nothing more.

Sometimes I thought he was religious. But he’s never shown signs of it. No church, prayer meetings or anything. There’ve been times when I thought he was even above that. Then he became Parfait. And destroyed my illusions. I still love him though.

Sylvia and Gavin choose not to join me for breakfast when they enter the small dining room. I guess they feel vulnerable and trust each other, more them they do me. It’s rude of them to not even nod ‘good morning’ though, considering I brought them to this good place. Maybe they guessed we suspected them and they’re still cross.

Anyway. Whatever. I’m going out in the air. I’m going to take a look at the famous wolf pit, probably buy some overpriced tourist trinkets that would bring on Guy’s scorn, if he were here, and a book of some kind about the Green Children of Wulpet. There are bound to be all sorts to choose from.

Sylvia and Gavin are out walking as well now, and I make an effort to wave to them but the reaction I get is, well, I think its disdain. What a cheek!

There are quite a lot of people out in this quaint old village and they all greet me politely. Most are actively friendly.

The wolf pit is sign-posted but I’m asking an elderly man for directions anyway because I think he’ll be interesting to talk to. He is. ‘It’s not much to look at but at least it hasn’t been messed with.’

'You live here, I take it.'

'Yes. Call me Bob.'

'Celeste.'

'Unusual name.'

'My father was French.'

'Oh, dear girl, did you lose him in the...'

A lot of people can't bring themselves to say 'demon invasion' even now.

I save him the pain. 'No. An accident several years earlier.'

'In any case, I'm sorry to dear.' I think he'd adopt me if I asked.

There's a couple of locals here already, picking up litter. Bob's explaining how they like to get here early to do this, in case of early-riser tourists like myself. They're relaxed with their happy smiles and chatter about the warm weather. It feels like a different world.

It isn't anything much to look at. Basically, wire fencing around a big hole in the ground. The grass around it is mown and there's a small plaque with a very brief account of the story. And that's it.

Bob points me in the direction of the shops. 'Some will be open, and you can knock on any that aren't. They'll be glad of a customer.'

The litter pickers laugh at that and wave me off.

This feels great. I feel like I've been hiding in Guy's old headquarters for ever. New, nice people, fresh air and no sign of the violence. I buy three books because I can't choose between them and a porcelain ornament of the children that will make Guy cringe, when he's well again.

Oh, look out. Sylvia and Gavin are coming this way. They're headed for the wolf pit. This is ridiculous. I'm going to talk to them.

I've started by waving and calling 'hello'. They're hardly responding. Now I'm afraid I did something to offend them.

So, I walk with them, and ask openly.

Sylvia says, 'No.'

Gavin says, 'You'll see.'

I want to shake him. But this is oddly eerie. Suddenly I'm feeling dizzy. I guess things are catching up with me.

My voice emerges in little more than a whisper, 'The people here are all lovely.'

Sylvia scoffs.

I have probably exaggerated, 'Well, nice and peaceful. It's great to feel safe.'

Their reaction to the wolf pit is almost scary, until I realise it's something to do with the pit itself that's instilling fear. I'm just accepting that in the abstract when a green mist begins rising in the pit. Bob and his friends are still here. I'm looking to them for assurance, but I'm not assured.

'What the hell?'

They're all really frightened. And Sylvia thinks it's funny.

Bob is turning nasty, 'Get that boy away from me!'

'Bob, I...'

'He's a sickening bloody creature!'

'But Bob, he's just...'

Crumbs! Bob's trying to punch him. Gavin's dodging his weak efforts and Sylvia is looking slyly at the two litter pickers, who are staring at their old friend in shock.

She glances my way, 'Mrs. Saunders,' that's the B & B lady, 'thinks this servile, pottering pair are hilarious.'

One of the locals looks around. 'What!'

The other is already marching towards Mrs. Saunders house.

I can see her kicking on the door.

'Sylvia!'

She giggles like a naughty child, 'Jerome worked so hard to rescue me, stupid boy.'

The green mist is flowing over the rim of the hole and spreading on the grass there. I can't believe Guy got this so wrong. He must be sicker than I thought. These two have somehow bypassed his psychic assessment, and I have no idea what to do.

Now what the hell is going on? There are people coming out of their homes, arguing and even hitting each other. Bob is shouting at the litter pickers and I certainly don't feel safe now.

I'm edging away from the houses and shops, away from the wolf pit, when I feel a strong hand on my back. Turning in terror, I am confronted by someone who can't possibly be here.

Am I hallucinating? 'Guy?'

'Yes.'

How could he be here? How can he be better so soon? I'm massively relieved to feel strong again, though.

Soon he's pushing me down the little lane. 'Keep walking. You'll be away from any problems along there.'

Naturally, I turn to see him heading back into the squabbling village and I can tell he's intent on something. His back is strong, straight and rigid. I know him well enough to be certain he is using the power of his mind for something.

Yes, that's it. The green mist had been flowing into the village, and now it's changing direction, retreating to the pit. As it does so the villagers who had been yelling and fighting are dazed and confused by their own behaviour.

Sylvia and Gavin are furious. And scared. Their feet are moving but they don't want them to. This is utterly mesmerising. I didn't know he could do that. They're screaming now, but still they walk to the pit.

Some minutes pass as I stare dumbfounded, not believing what I see.

Bob seems to have joined me, 'Witches.'

I have hardly any voice, 'What?'

'They cursed us. And now your friend is cursing them.'

'No,' I can find my voice to defend the man I love. 'That's Guy Edrich. He's saving us.' I glance briefly to the stunned old man. 'Again.'

The two vicious descendants of the original green children, the ones causing trouble throughout the world I now realise, are falling into the pit. Judging by the green mist and his past methods, I can be quite certain Guy is sending them back to the home they poisoned.

His mind, powerful, dizzying, hits mine. I have to stay here. I can't go with him when he leaves. Which he is doing within minutes. He used my ignorance of Sylvia and Gavin's true identities to get them here and will not be informing me of his next plan. I'd be angry, if I didn't feel so miserable.

Jerome DeLanza

Yeah, so I've been sitting here in the car, watching Sally in her garden through binoculars for almost an hour. How the hell am I supposed to follow these orders? I told Guy it isn't in me to be an assassin. At the end of the demon invasion, when I agreed to join him, he promised he would be the assassin, when necessary. I know it's not his fault that he can't physically do this. But seriously. I know this woman. She was always nice to me.

It wouldn't make a difference if she was a total stranger, or a known fracking paedo. I told Guy this when he was training me with weapons. I haven't even done target practice for months. I'll probably miss and do nothing better than let her know someone's on to her.

Right. I'm getting out of the car. The small gun in my pocket feels very heavy. I have a plan. My plan is to use her kindness towards me, to lull her into a false sense of security. My best chance is to make this a cartoon in my mind. So, I'm doing that. Everything Guy drummed into me is unfolding efficiently. All I have to do is not think of her as real.

She looks up and waves. I wave back. And think to smile after. I fancy her smile is less natural than normal. And I know that's because I'm scared. However, as usual fear of messing up has me putting on a confident air.

An idea to explain my being here has sprung to mind, 'Hi, how are you?' 'I'm fine. And you?'

She is eyeing me suspiciously, but this will work. 'I think Ava and Steven are descendants of Green Children.'

Laughter bursts from her mouth.

'Oh right,' I have to behave as though she isn't one of them, 'you don't know. All this trouble we're seeing has been caused by descendants of Green Children.'

She's still laughing.

'Jerome, you have always been a fool.'

'What?' What the frack?

'You're not going to fire that gun.'

I'm looking down at my hand. Shocked to see I have taken the Glock from my pocket. Guy would give me a real bollocking. You're not supposed to show the weapon until you're about to use it. Obviously.

I'm raising it to aim at her now.

'You can't shoot me, Jerome. You couldn't hit the side of a barn.' Her voice is rising viciously, 'You're a useless little prat. You always have been!'

I think to pull the trigger. I'm hardly looking at my target, never mind aiming. There's a crack, a kick from the gun, and a woman laughing her socks off.

'Have as many goes as you like!' She roars.

I'm shocked to feel the gun being snatched from my hand. And confused. Sally is moving towards me but not close enough to touch. As I turn to see who's about to kill me Steven shoots Sally.

'What?' What the frack?

Ava is taking my hand and leading me to a garden bench. They sit either side of me.

Ava explains, 'You know a lot about us, Jerome, so we feel safe to tell you the rest. You know how we're all connected.'

'Us? We?'

'We've been trying to stop them. Our connection to you and the magnification of our collective minds by your friend, told us when to act. And where. Guy forced the two most powerful through to our home realm, where they'll be destroyed. We couldn't do that.'

I'm gaping at Ava, when Steven takes over, 'When we realized you were heading for trouble, we came to help. Her mind was so fully occupied with tormenting you that she didn't even notice any movement or our presence.' Ava finished with a promise I couldn't immediately take in.
'With the help of the new arrivals, we can kill the other troublemakers.'

'What?'

'We know how they're creating the fights amongst humans. We can't make the humans stop. We can stop our kind.'

Celeste Corsaire

I walked along the lane for about twenty minutes, right out into the country. I had no idea what was happening in Wulpet and worse than that, no idea where Guy was.

I was scared to accept a lift but even more afraid to stay there. In the end I took a chance on what seemed to be a nice lady. She took me all the way into London but I couldn't direct her to Guy's headquarters just in case she was one of them. Instead, I got her to drop me off fairly near to his flat. I lied to her saying that I was in the block of flats near to his, just in case.

I was terrified with every step I took getting from there to Guy's place, because of the mayhem in the streets. In the end, though my heart was beating fit to bust, I dodged all the scuffles and no one directly tried to attack me. They all were engaged in their own personal battles.

Finally, I'm inside the flat and locking the door behind me. I'm trying to contact Guy on his mobile. At last, he's answering and he's asking where I am. He wants to know I'm safe. It's not over though. He's going to collect me and take me to the headquarters. I'm looking forward

to seeing the green children again. I have decided names for them: Phoebe and Woody. They were the names of two of my oldest friends. I haven't seen either of them since before the demon invasion.

Jerome DeLanza

So, we're all here now. Ava, Steven, Phoebe and Woody apparently, out of their cell, Celeste and Guy. Ava had shocking news. Even I had no idea of this: Sally had a partner and I only ever saw her alone. I can tell by Guy's face that he believes this man to be very dangerous.

Guy is drawing together the minds of the others: that is Steven, Phoebe and Woody. It seems they might be able to locate him by working together. The aliens look relatively calm but Guy's face is a picture of agony.

He wants me to stay here with Celeste, which means he is going into serious danger again. The expressions on the others' faces tells me this is going to be very nasty. They are going with him and I am quietly telling Ava to stay as clear of the action as she can, because Guy will be wrecked and need help getting home. She's just turned white as sheet but says she'll try.

Guy Edrich

Our quest is taking us down to Kent. My companions are a great help in guiding us to this place. Ava is driving whilst Steven and I decide how to deal with his terrible man. Phoebe and Woody are telling us he is tremendously strong, both physically and mentally. And they keep emphasizing that he is evil. I'm trying to assuage their fears with a reassurance of my Parfait abilities.

Through general conversation with them I am beginning to understand their constant phrases. Phoebe's repeated, 'Where are they?' is as I expected, connected to a desire to confirm more of her kind are within reach, because she needed those like her who would fight on the side of good. This most especially because she was aware of how very bad this particular one is. And Woody's phrase, 'I don't know what this is,' as well as being unaware of human senses, time and so on, he wanted to get his bearings to begin the search.

We have reached the outer gardens of the beautiful estate this man has taken for his own. There's a boy working alone in the garden. I recognise Col from Celeste's graphic descriptions: he is a cherubic sixteen-year-old with curly blonde hair, blue eyes and most telling of all, he has a distinctive birthmark on his right cheek which he tries to cover with a hand or hair. He seems undamaged. I tell him I am a friend of Celeste. He guesses my name. I have to tell him very sternly not to repeat that to anyone. His begging me for help will draw attention to me so I am telling him to stay right where he is. We will be back to help him.

Now by joining consciousness with Steven, Phoebe and Woody we have located the general position of the man. They are trying to scan across the children he brought here with him. It seems Gavin was here at

one time. I cannot yet find the other children but I sense something multiple and very dark. I want to get any innocents to safety and any bad ones out of the way. This man has made no incursion into my mind but I fear he could discover us through Phoebe or Woody so I am sending them back to Ava and Col. Steven and I move closer to the back of the large old house.

I am drawn to the outside entrance to a cellar. Naturally it is secured with a padlock. Steven sees my drive to enter it, nudges past me and uses a method I can't properly see or understand, other than when he steps back to show the padlock is removed.

He does not want to enter first. What I sense in there is misery. So does Steven, though less starkly. My mind is working on different levels: the need to alleviate misery, the probability that whatever the cause or nature of the suffering is, it will lead me to my quarry, and the need to destroy that evil.

Steven follows close at my back. I can feel him behind me, gasping and weeping over the sight that meets us.

I must observe this dispassionately because I know Steven will reveal his feelings and that will broadcast to those of his kind, including the man who did this. I must not allow my own presence here to be sensed. I recall Celeste telling me there were five children. Clearly Col survived. He along with these three must be the only other humans on the estate otherwise I would sense them.

In my mind I can see twelve-year-old Eloise being raped by him. He began that four years ago and was bestial from the start. He used her as a slave in the house, in the kitchen: cooking, cleaning, laundry and all other menial tasks when she was far too young to complete those jobs successfully. And he beat her when she failed. With glee, he passes on to me that agony of cuts and bruising. And broken bones that can never mend properly.

Also pushed into my mind is six-year-old Kane. There are graphic details of how he took the small child's eye and implanted in the bloody socket a grossly bio-engineered replacement which fed the child a sense of smell and sound, as well as sight.

And the only other here, dying, is ten-year-old Annabel. This one he has killed and brought back to life twice. He expects to repeat that foul deed. With that I also feel Annabel's misery of coming back each time. She wanted to stay where he had inadvertently sent her.

Sixteen-year-old Col has seen all this and is afraid now to run away even though he is required to work at the outskirts of the estate. His master knows where he is at all times and to Col, is omnipotent as well as omniscient. That is the sport this evil being enjoys with a boy who once believed Gavin to be his friend.

I am aware now of Steven's strength. He will take all children, as well as Phoebe and Woody to safety. I have no sense of Ava's movements and thoughts. She might have purposefully closed down to avoid his attention.

Turning to Steven, I whisper urgently into his ear. He understands without explanation and draws no attention by responding. One of the children can hobble with his help and one is small enough for him to carry. The other must stay here. I doubt she has long to live and I am desperately sorry to know she may well die again, alone.
'Take Col too. Have Jerome meet you in a safe place. He will know where you all must wait for me.' Cryptic and built on trust. If my enemy is 'listening' he'll not know any details.

In fact, I can sense his purpose. It is an echo of much that I already know. Added to that I now understand that he is the main instigator behind the chaos in this realm from which he expects to bring order, along with gaining ardent followers of his own kind. All as wicked.

He thrives on violence and misery, much of his power has been built by sapping that of many of the descendants of the originals arriving in this realm. I, therefore, must allow the Parfait powers within me to develop further, in a manner that I have always resisted.

There is a bombardment on the defensive perimeter of my mind. He's trying to shock me into dropping my barriers. I had images of how the children came to be in that appalling state. I can feel their horror, their fear and the pain. This hits me in a single blast outside of time. The abuse of the innocents was for him, a major amusement.

My enemy is making his way down here and I will not allow him to attempt punishing me by bringing this poor child in and out of a hell of his making. Instead, I set off to meet him in the library of the house, thus keeping him from his victim. He is beginning to develop a little comprehension of my being something more than human.

Now he is crashing into the room.

Recognition flashes into his dark eyes. 'Guy Edrich!' This grips his attention. 'I saw what you did to Cacodaemus. By avoiding you since I began all this, I have grown stronger than you can begin to imagine.'

I realise now why he had found a way of spending time with Celeste, why he claimed to be helping those children, offering to take them to safety following the takoloshe invasion, and that he sent Gavin to discover my present location. Added to that, he was aware of my connection to Jerome. And that Jerome knew Sally as always being kind, whilst remaining entirely unaware of this individual's existence. He gained details concerning me and sees himself as very lucky since I have come to him when he knew he needed to seek me out. He was aware he would have to defeat me before he could complete his purpose here.

'So, you'd have me believe you are more powerful than Cacodaemus.' 'You have seen all that I have achieved in comparison to his clumsy efforts. And you did not witness what I have become.'

I now abruptly release a psychic stream that sends him to his knees. But he is still alive.

Thus, I must press on with a psychological angle for their kind, 'Sally Fielding is dead.' I can feel him denying it. That is not a denial to convince me but a powerful reaction to losing half of his sense of being. This news has hit the mark. Only now is he aware that his binary pair is lost to him. They should be like the two electrons of a helium atom. He has been sent off kilter, like a badly loaded washing machine, or a car with a broken spring.

I feel his enormous effort to re-establish equilibrium.

And I force reality home, 'Your closest allies have been sent back to a poisoned realm. The half of you that was Sally Fielding lies dead from a single bullet. You have no effective support.'

Too late, I sense his spirits rally. He twists as he rises. With a pistol in his hand.

This is agony. The bullet grazes my arm, gouging out flesh. My reaction though, has a power I have never before drawn on. At my mental demand the weapon flies from his hand. My effort to send him crashing across the room fails. Physical weakening saps my mental strength. But I do have him staggering backwards.

I am observing his panic, as I deliberately provide a warning along with very personal knowledge of him.

'You are in a human body, Martin Taylor.'

The warning gives him a chance to attempt to protect a fragile physical human frame, by attacking my mind. But I am a step ahead. Pushing into matter I sense my hands taking a grip of his heart. It is a real physical force squeezing the organ.

I can feel his life force giving in while his mind with its alien element, reaches out for a weapon to use against me. He can find nothing. Yet still he is not dying. I must concentrate all of my energy into understanding his true nature.

In the first flush of success my concentration is interrupted!

'Damn you Ava!' A momentary stealing of my sharp focus has me roaring at the woman who thought I required her help. As I return to my one purpose, I feel Taylor pull free in order to begin draining Ava's life force.

He displays some insight into my position, with a view to weakening me. This is almost impossible. I cannot break away from this battle in order to help an innocent woman.

Now he attacks me with a well-formed concept of my nature, 'You see this as a classic battle between good and evil. It's a battle you expect to win because in the myths of this world, good always prevails.'

In order to regain my strength and balance, I will allow him to keep his mind on that, and sadly, on Ava as well.

I can give no regard for her. I have one task. One only. Taylor is close to death and reveals something I had not begun to suspect when Ava broke into my initial success. The physical death of his body will not be the end of him. I can cloak the knowledge in my mind, that he thinks he has shielded in his. It is an obvious solution he believes I can't possibly succeed in delivering, even if I guess it.

Now I will reveal the full force of something even more than a Parfait of The Elect, as I fall on him in a physical, as well as a psychic hold. Having seen the gunshot weaken me, he is unprepared for the fist slamming into his temple, spinning him far enough for me to pull him into a double shoulder lock. Yet by brute force alone he is pulling free. Thankfully, when he attempts a fresh psychic incursion, I am steadfast.

We are wrestling, with Ava somehow floating around us, still in his grasp. He cannot know this thought: if he were to release Ava, he might beat me.

Allowing part of a two-way conduit between my mind and his, I reveal my Credentes side, while I steal the one piece of information he wishes to keep from me. It is a fact I had surmised but until this moment was unable to use. He has a great force within him, as do I. Combined, they can achieve anything.

His own evil nature works against him. I draw it into my domain. Straining against phenomenal powers, both physical and tapping into deep fears he had until now been unaware of, I find myself dragging him through space at faster than light speed. He would let go of me now. But he is too late.

I must pass through this wolf pit with him but first I am able to breach his grip on Ava. She has fallen in the mist, on the ground beside the pit.

We pass over the silver water, plunging into a murky green atmosphere, thick with duplicate, wailing spirits. He can't cast off his body: a body that needs to breathe air. While that weakens him, the part of me that does not require an atmosphere of any kind holds me firm, until I make it back out of the pit, into the green mist enveloping the lawn of this tourist site, in Wulpet.

Becoming Me

Jerome

Bloody hell! I'd been inside Guy's head enough to know what I could be developing into. I did not want baby Selwyn, my son, to experience any of this crap. Damn-bloody-nation! OK, it's OK. I can feel you calming me, Guy. Thanks man.

Guy

Poor Jerome. Alfred had no idea what he was making when he sired his son. Jerome suffered more acutely than any other part-human and part-Empyrean. I now know why.

*This story is loosely based on Guy Edrich's awesome psychic development in the final novel of the Guy Edrich trilogy: **Amduscias**.*

As a young child I watched the preternatural scene of Takkennman, tall, thin and long-limbed, leading a child across the Boundary to his dark world. I felt his malevolence. And I felt the child's fear and confusion for being woken by an unearthly stranger who could compel her to accompany him whilst knowing that to do so was very dangerous.

Only a year ago, as an adult, I awoke in the churning home atmosphere of Black Shuck and the Gabriel Hounds; their presence was accompanied by flashes of red flames amidst the squall.

Lately, I have seen the glory of the Phoenix in her own world. Soaring through a still, blue sky, landing heavily in the Arabian Desert. I felt the heat of her flames as she burnt down to ashes. And I wept with joy when she reformed to rise and fly through the air once more.

Throughout the four decades of my life in this realm, I have had all that any man could wish for: a wonderful family, physical strength, good health and a sound mind, reliable friends. Even when the Parfaits of the Elect, the Credentes, the Empyreans who arrived here centuries ago with the purpose of making humans good, turned tail at the first alien incursion, I was left with the where-with-all to protect mankind. In my need to defend this world, with my mind expanding, I became aware of other realms, other beings, other times and places, and not only could I understand the nature and cause of the incursions, but I could stop them and even close the Boundary to prevent their return.

Yet there were times that I felt aching fear when all those around me sought a fearless hero. I knew that the future of this world went beyond human habitation, along with many more worlds that once occupied time and space.

I have wrestled with darkness, sourness and bitterness, along with disgust, when I came to know the nature of my people, their secrets, and their danger to humanity.

When first my psyche began its travels, I gasped over the sights and sounds of other places, I marvelled at some, but in others I saw brittle

shards of glass flying through the atmosphere. Fire and ashes shot through with those explosive fragments. On Unzow I struggled to free myself from cruel monsters whilst breathing in the rusted-iron odour of the spilled blood of loved friends. I killed in a blind fury then.

I have also killed in cold blood when left with no alternative. Here I killed those sentient creatures for survival, on other occasions I have been an expert assassin with a sniper rifle, to save the humans of earth, unaware of a lethal enemy. Always I killed with good reason.

As a child I cried and wailed over the hauntings of beings that crossed the Boundary into this world's realm: demons that would possess me. That was my childhood and in time, the childhood of my young son, my godson, and now my stepson. It is one of the trials of our kind.

I clearly recall the time I sailed through the violently crashing black waves of Laog, losing my crew of volunteers. There also, I felt the anguish of judging whether or not to prevent children killing a beast with their bare hands. I watched the keen blade with which they began skinning the huge, fearsome dog before it drew its last breath. I screamed at them to stop but Black Shuck's agonised howling followed me as I saved another life: that of an innocent Laogian mother.

Moments after I moved on from that place I fell into a bottomless pit. A black void. In it I felt a tempest raging, I saw bolts of lightning slicing through blinding sheets of it. Eventually that gave way to a black, star-studded sky. In that quiet moment, rather than peace I felt the threats of minds I could not place, belonging to unidentified beings in unknown times and secret realms.

I have felt both despair and hope; seen ugliness and splendour. I could pursue a beautiful woman or be haunted by an old man. Choices so often, were dramatic.

I have soared through the brightly coloured waves of light in the atmosphere of Vinctala, been tempted by a dream-like Tuclean female inviting me to join a warm and tender embrace with her, and her friends. I felt the softness of her smooth skin while the joy of that balmy climate, the laughter of those sweet women, their beauty, danced me into a symphony of life as charming creatures worked with the dawn's euphonious birdsong; mingling with the melody of earth's Romanticism.

I have floated in the fragrant clouds of Fallon Va Xlima and I have felt the peace of the future state of my own rose garden. There I inhaled the delicious scent I once enjoyed with my daughter. I was reminded of the halcyon days of life when my family was young; seemingly human. Lorna in the garden with baby Russell and toddler Harriette.

I have battled past the Qulzo beasts of Waala, I have walked through the dark shadows of Luela's giant Oelna trees. And I have chosen to never again employ the psychic gifts I developed unwillingly, but which enabled me to save humanity from what they knew as demons.

I will never walk that way again. Mine now is the new path. One I have chosen in the cold light of day. I will never again travel the universe,

or through time. By so doing I will quieten the psyches of others awoken by my expanding awareness. I may never again enjoy personal happiness but I do have the satisfaction of knowing this world will remain safe and free from outside attacks. And I will live with the knowledge that a minority of humans will always cause misery for the vast majority.

The Vinctalin Invasion

These accounts are connected to the long story of the fifteen volume Vinctalin Legacy series.

The logs have been written by characters describing their experiences of surviving an alien invasion.

Log: Dr. Alexander Byefield

I like to push myself but only so far as is healthy. I enjoy exercising for the relief of tensions, physical and mental, for relief of the mind and for the muscles. Thus, I have a good physique and I will admit that I occasionally show off. As a doctor of medicine I advocate any physical exercise that is steroid-free and not extreme enough to cause injury. As a psychiatrist, I recommend exploring one's own psyche, with care. I would therefore strongly discourage anyone from doing what I was doing on that fateful night.

I shared a house with friends. It was a good-sized property that we had made one major alteration to. In the basement we had a laboratory for the purpose of psychological experimentation. I had spent several hours late at night making notes and being sure to keep the science pure in my experiment. My friend checked the alarm was set and left me to it.

The purpose of a sensory-deprivation chamber is that you lose touch with reality, including time. And the thing with me is, I'm so good at losing myself, blanking my mind, that we knew I should stay in there for longer than we could allow anyone else. The theory being that having experienced the induced symptoms of paranoia, once back in my right mind, I could better understand the suffering of some of our patients.

When I came out, I felt fine. Somewhat spiritual certainly, but not disorientated or delusional. I recognised the lab as it should be. At first, I was a little dismayed to find that none of my friends had stood guard over the chamber in case I should run into difficulties, but I assumed whoever's turn it had been had slipped out to the lav.

I wanted to complete my report with everything fresh, and possibly a little too clear. I made no assumptions concerning the clarity of thought since certainly I had experienced a change in my normal mental state. From time to time during the two hours I spent writing up my work, I wondered why none of my colleagues had been down to check on me, but I was not perturbed. We had plenty of safety checks inside the chamber and I was probably being monitored via computer data.

It was dawn by the time I'd finished and climbed the steps planning to frighten them with a story of how their neglect had almost cost me my life. A person with a dangerously macabre sense of humour might say the joke was on me. You see, I survived the night. They did not.

For long moments I questioned the results I'd just written up. Could I have overestimated my mental stability? Had I discovered something new in changing mental states? Yet the cold truth hit me hard, long before I could make any sense of it.

Now in this new life, without my friends, it is difficult for me to make those around me understand the ethics and philosophy by which I lead my life. I am a psychiatrist. I understand what can motivate a young lad into attacking females out of lust as well as lashing out in fear. Although I was willing to defend others from such an attack, I would rather take a beating than cause serious harm to a traumatised boy who hardly knew the day of the week even before being struck by this terrifying catastrophe. I am a true pacifist. I would actually rather die than take the life of another human being. Yet only a couple of days into this dreadful new life I did kill that confused youngster, unintentionally yes, but he was just as dead as if I'd picked him off with a sniper's rifle.

And so, when those around me demanded I should fight and kill the aliens I had come to know, I refused. I was not afraid of the labour they forced on us. It was hardly arduous. I was fascinated by their society. I compared their physiological and psychological profiles to ours and they measured up favourably. I saved the life of one of their females, along with her baby. Frankly I couldn't even begin to understand how others could consider attacking them never mind murdering all of those whose whereabouts we knew of. They were family groups, for pity's sake. I asked what they planned to do with the children and they had no answer that they would tell to me, so it was obvious. And that of course was entirely stupid because what exactly could they be fighting to preserve once they'd turned us into the slayers of children?

So, I was forced to fight in my own way. I made certain of reaching the Tendanny village first and I talked to them. We developed an alliance with at least some of the people my 'comrades' would have slaughtered, and whose loved-ones had been slaughtered by, I concede.

Most of the people joining Jonathan and Stanzi's desperate rebellion had no idea where it would lead. They'd sunk to being governed by their survival instincts. But I had no doubt that Jonathan and Stanzi at the very least had calculated the odds as well as I had: if we survived the first battle against one small settlement of Tendanny we would die when the Guards were sent to crush us. What none of us could have known, could get nowhere near guessing even, was the nature of that alien hierarchy.

At the end of the latest and bloodiest of battles I have become a proficient surgeon. I have stitched up enormous gashes in the flesh of people I'd come to care about. Some will die from the blood-loss I have no equipment to replace. Some will die from the poison injected into those wounds by those dreadful talons. Some will live to fight another day.

I am sickened to the core.

In part, my job has become, for as long as I am alive to do it, the balance to Jonathan's '*survive at all costs*' and the sole provider of the argument against Stanzi's '*kill the bastards any way you can.*' So clearly, I will

continue in the only way I know how: saving any lives I can, for as long as I can. Then I will gladly die.

Initial impressions of key personalities: Jonathan is an eagle-eyed, astute schemer with an extraordinary overall comprehension of social forces. That doesn't mean he always picks the best path through life. He judges me to be a naïve idealist. Stanzi is of a type I have occasionally seen on a professional basis. He is potentially one of the most dangerous men I have encountered, not because he has a mental illness, but because he hasn't. He is extraordinarily intelligent and he has a will to survive at any price. His saving grace is that that will springs from a desire to protect others rather than himself alone. He believes, possibly quite rightly, that no one will survive this invasion without him. He is a highly trained, expert killer. And he is charismatic. Already he has a fan-base willing to follow him into death.

Log: Benjamin Stanzini

Yeah. More of a doer than a writer, but Caroline can be very persuasive. So can I. I will be requiring a rich reward in bed tonight when I show her my homework. Also, I agree that my minuscule army of courageous, untrained, inexperienced civilians, deserve recognition. We've fought and won battles a trained platoon of regulars might have lost. They entered into combat they calculated, quite rightly, not one of us could survive. I was as dumbstruck as the rest when Mighty Mettle the leader of the Disciples of the Protectors, Military Martyr to the Advanced Human Society, veteran of Vinctalin wars across the galaxy, rescued us.

At that stage I guessed we were caught up in a galactic war that had just reached Earth. It was some time later that I realised the AHS didn't actually have the wherewithal to win their fight against the Vinctalin. On the other hand, we had Jonathan Trad-Williams and Pakow Lam Fellen which, in my estimation, was a far more scary prospect for any enemy than Mettle and all of his recruits put together.

Once Jonathan had the upper hand over the leaders of the AHS we could devise a plan to attack the Vinctalin home world and wipe out every last bastard one of them. Except of course, we didn't know as much as we thought we did. We won that war only to discover that wasn't the only Vinctalin Linkage in the galaxy.

Now off to collect my gold star.

Log: Caroline Lambeth

Two years ago I felt to be in a strong, safe position. Our allied forces had destroyed the Vinctalin linkage in this sector of the galaxy, Pakow Lam Fellen had brought home to Earth huge armies of Vinctalite Guards and he was building a planetary defence system superior to anything owned by the Vinctalin or the AHS. Also, and better, my darling little son was thriving and his father had returned home safely.

Nothing on Earth has ever run smoothly for any length of time and this was doubly true of the post-invasion era. Our immediate concern following the Great War was the two Vinctalite Emperors that had come back with the victorious allies: Hal Laxshoo and Threllor Lam Zondex. Also, two of Pakow's older brothers turned up. The two Vinctalite Emperors put any of Earth's leaders from any period of history, to shame, in terms of mendacity. Along with the deceit and false historical accounts we'd been given from the AHS, as Stanzi would put it: *every bugger in the galaxy is tricking out every other bugger. They make our old despots look like Goldilocks.*

Just over a year ago Zondex attacked our town. We survived by the skin of our teeth but he left a ghastly legacy which meant that Stanzi once again had to lead in a war he might not return from and I couldn't get back on the roller coast with him this time. For the sake of my sanity and the care of our son, and not without heartbreak, I decided I had to leave him.

Shortly after that we were forced to evacuate the town we'd built up through years of hardship, because Zondex had sent a message, believing he could trade with the Vinctalin. Pakow Lam Fellen knew there was no chance of that. He warned us to prepare for a massive Vinctalin attack which he expected to be able to defend us from with the use of his new armies, armaments and the PDS.

Our allies failed us. Our town was destroyed and once again I survived, along with my child and my friends. But Pakow lost almost all of his Guards. All over again we were rescued by the Advanced Humans but soon after we re-grouped and settled into a new town I was betrayed by a new friend who stole a precious piece of equipment and took it to the AHS Home World.

I know Stanzi well. When I wanted another child I had little difficulty in getting him to sleep with me again. It broke his heart and I am very sorry for that, but how can I regret any method that gave me my darling little daughter. Around that time I also became one of Earth's new Ambassadors to the AHS. And Alex's lover.

We discovered more lies, deceit and danger in the AHS. Jonathan devised one of his horribly effective schemes which resulted in our take-over of that world a few months ago.

Alex uncovered truths that shocked their citizens more than it did us. They had a secret ruling elite, calling themselves Veekeren, who felt to have the right to recruit people like us from worlds they'd rescued and which had long ago supposedly been created by them. I cannot praise Jonathan enough. Because of him we liberated the ordinary recruits to the AHS and repaired that entire world.

Log: Emperor Pakow Lam Fellen

Before I came to Earth with my master Barenbana, a member of the clan of Halbolival, I had a father who had eight wives and twenty-three children. In the Tajat uprising I lost my father, all of his wives, nine siblings

and was unable to ascertain the fate of six more. Since then, I have married and begun rebuilding my family with the birth of my twins. The wife I loved with all my heart was slain in a Vinctalin attack. I survived their torment and their slavery for many years. Then I lived with bereavement caused by them. And finally, I am broken by them: once more the victim of Halbolival's torture.

Even so, I can look back without regret. Almost four years after coming to Earth I have been freed from Vinctalin slavery; a condition I could previously never have imagined. I have played a major role in the destruction of their Sector 3 Linkage and aided in the liberation of the AHS Home World (Irax). I now enjoy a level of comprehension that was impossible in my old life. I even remained on Irax long enough to set up a new, fair government of their own people. I left Hal Laxshoo ruling that world as my representative, and as my spy.

Soon after that Alex, as an Ambassador for Earth, set out on a tour of human occupied worlds with the Ambassadors of Irax, with a view to educating those people about the Veekerens influence in the galaxy. They were accompanied by Stanzi, my sister Pitlon Gowry and a few of Mettle's Disciples. Alex wanted the Ambassadors of Irax to understand the extent of the deceit of the Veekerens who had ruled their world for centuries.

Some of that was achieved before they were stranded by a form of Vinctalin new to us. Alex described them well, as halfway to human, which contrasted with the grey beasts I had known. He also believed they could become our friends: a concept I refused to entertain. At that time we also encountered another species of Vinctalin on Earth. They have a wholly human appearance, though I suspect they are engineered. I was driven to destroy those members of the latter group that came to Earth, in revenge for my Guard, Vesen Lassa's, murdered lover.

We have explored far-off worlds that long ago were occupied by Vinctalin, in an effort to uncover our own history and physical make up. Tests show that my race, the Vinctalites, possess a minute quantity of unidentified DNA. My discoveries have proved unpalatable to us all, as well as disturbing to the humans of Earth.

This time I cannot survive Halbolival's abuse. I fear the data it took from me will cause the destruction of both Earth and Irax. I cannot imagine how those worlds can survive its wrath but I have hope that my friends will find a way to live on, perhaps hidden on an uncharted planet.

If you recover this log, Pitlon, please express to my family and friends my joy for the years of freedom given to me by Alex, the pleasure I have known in my love for them all, and my faith that one day the Vinctalin will be defeated.

Log: Jonathan Trad-Williams

At the beginning, I lost my mind. Something I'd never before experienced. That was understandable. The unexplained loss of my family – to find

them dead – well, I still don't have the words, the concepts, of how I felt. Neither do I try to define them.

Other than that horror, that indescribable loss, there is one more crystal memory from the first day of the invasion. I asked myself a question. Could we fight back?

Immediately I had an answer of a kind. It was more of a *should* than a *could* that predicated my plan. You see, I'd met Benjamin Stanzini and I knew, I knew he could provide the other fifty percent of what we needed to do. We would win one small fight and after that there would be another step we could try to take. If we won that, there'd be another. That is business and that is life, no matter the nature of the competition.

I would apply every ounce of my renowned stubbornness, all of my ingenuity, every atom of my physical strength and every last one of my many skills in leading and manipulating those around me, to defeat whatever enemy had the temerity to take that which is mine. They had killed my family. I had nothing to lose. But don't mistake my long series of wars for mindless revenge. I simply could not allow them to take anything more.

This log continues the account six years after the initial harvesting of Earth by our appalling enemy, the Vinctalin. Our small expeditionary force had been investigating the origins, and indeed the nature of, the Vinctalites, when we were caught by Halbolival itself. Poor Alex suffered their torture once again. This time he survived as the result of a strange friendship with a Vinctalin I do not trust, naming himself Landresiman. Unfortunately, that rescue was too late to save the life of my very good friend, Pakow Lam Fellen.

When we landed back safely on Earth, I could hardly believe my eyes. Pakow's comatose body was being carried to the hospital as I looked at rank upon rank of Vinctalite Emperors and Guards. Pakow had told me to trust his brother's abilities, whilst taking care concerning his loyalties. No one could possibly have guessed at this though. Rosek Isolla had devised a means of contacting the Vinctalites attacking Earth in the names of their various Vinctalin masters, through his boosted cytrel implant. He sent them proof that they could be free of the Vinctalin.

Clearly there was no way I could form an alliance with those awesome Emperors, never mind command them. In fact, I was down to planning the survival of the few humans left on Earth when an unbelievable opportunity for my most audacious proposal ever, seemed to write itself. And only marginally less astonishing to me at the time, though I should have known better, I found Rosek Isolla to be as honourable as his brother. He'd felt ready to take his brother's place as Emperor, but instead he saw a better role for himself in my scheme and set off to begin the war that would end all wars, so far as the Vinctalin were concerned in any case.

No one, not even Pitlon, knew how Pakow could have awoken from his coma, considering the appalling damage Halbolival had inflicted on his brain through overworking those horrible implants. In fact, the

mystery of Pakow's albeit arduously slow recovery, was explained when the people who should have allied with us millennia ago, revealed to us our lost ancient history. Alex, of course, had this worked out long ago. There was no coincidence in the existence of human beings inhabiting many planets in the galaxy. With that final piece of the puzzle the end of the Vinctalin was, in my mind, a matter of time only.

And so we forced the descendants of those joint ancestors of ours to join in the war that would finally see an end to any bio-engineered race, other than our friends of course. Those who had dubbed our first set of battles The Great War, had no name for what was to end this story.

The winning of each battle. The inch by inch, sector by sector, retaking of our galaxy was a wretched, horrific, relentless series of campaigns in which we lost many very, very courageous men and women. For details of this historic victory I refer you to Book 15 of The Vinctalin Legacy. There you will come to understand my personal awakening, along with that of all the humans of Earth.

Our other books:

The Vinctalin Legacy series

The Vinctalin Legacy: Survival (Earth comes under attack)

Book 1 Harvest (heroes defeat alien invaders; then they face the Vinctalin)

They awake to the grisly sight of alien invaders silently, methodically collecting the bodies of their victims. When forced into a life of slavery three desperate heroes stand out as leaders. With courage, determination and ingenuity they launch a daring counterattack and against all the odds, emerge victorious, only to discover their masters also were in bondage.

Book 2 Sacrifice (the Vinctalin set out on a ruthless quest for vengeance) The survivors have upset a rigid pre-ordained social balance. Raging battles ensue: brother versus sister, masters seeking vengeance on failing slaves, and heroes with bold plans preparing to make the greatest sacrifice of all. The Vinctalin are ferocious in their response to the rebellion provoked by a few daring Tajats, and which their own Emperor has failed to quell.

Book 3 Spawning (Jonathan devises plan to turn tables on devious super-race)

Without the eleventh-hour rescue by Mettle and his Disciples Earth's courageous resistance fighters would have perished. But this proves to be no benevolent cavalry. Nor are they knights in shining armour. Jonathan quickly gets the measure of them. He acquires something Mettle hasn't even begun to anticipate: the willing cooperation of Halbolival's phenomenal Emperor, Pakow Lam Fellen.

The Vinctalin Legacy: Retaliation (Earth humans ally with alien rescuers)

Book 4 Infiltration (Stanzi battles demons while his friends are prey to imposters)

The rescuers of Earth's courageous survivors have a fervent ambition to save humanity from the evil that is Vinctalin. Their society, their Home World, their technology and their leaders must be wonderful, splendid, shiny-bright and beyond the imagination of this desperate band of brave primitives.

Must it not?

Or are they worn out from trading their courage and good intentions for an endless, relentless, soul-destroying fight they have little hope of winning?

Book 5 Alliances (Heroes of Earth join war in space)

Courage is seen in sustained acts of mercy in the face of horrific brutality. It is witnessed in the gritty determination to prevail no matter how terrible the fight becomes. It appears in daring schemes and in the survival of appalling torture.

All of Earth's tiny surviving population are required to aid in the never-ending war. While Stanzi, Jonathan and Pakow travel to other worlds rescuing refugees, destroying a spawning and taking back the AHS Home World, Alex is forced to face the monsters who would make a monster of him.

Book 6 The Veekeren Element (the daunting human counter-attack)
The Vinctalin have ruled this galaxy unchallenged for millennia. Could their reign finally be coming to an end at the hands of an alliance of lower orders they were unable to imagine being forged? The alien Emperor, Pakow Lam Fellen, creates an ingenious method of destroying them. Sadly, a half-crazed psychiatrist from earth finds a fatal flaw in that plan. All is not lost however. The Emperor has gathered data that can be utilised in a vast and devious attack on the Vinctalin Home Worlds. But it is the secret scientific power behind the leadership of the Advanced Human Society that provides a realistic attempt to defeat the beasts.

The Vinctalin Legacy: The Ovinka (a strange alien device is brought to Earth)

Book 7 Zondex (there is an enemy inside Earth's defences)
When she felt the unnatural coldness of his body mounting hers, she was unable to hold in the scream. The hand that smothered her face was like dry leather. She felt her own stomach contents rising into her mouth and choked on it as he smothered her, and thrust himself icily into her.

Oh Hal, she wept, that wasn't even human.

Book 8 The Message (planet Earth is under relentless Vinctalin bombardment)

The message attracts Vinctalin from all sectors of the galaxy but not, as Zondex had supposed, with a view to trading. This assault is more extensive than any that Pakow has experienced. It is relentless, sustained, and defence is beyond the capabilities of the Guards loyal to Earth.

More than that, the promise of reinforcements from Earth's allies is suspiciously slow in coming.

Book 9 Veekeren (the allies of Earth attack the Advanced Humans)

The Vinctalin claim to be the creators of humanity.

The Veekeren claim to be the protectors of humanity.

Secrets and lies rule all their lives.

The lies are beginning to unravel.

Secrets are being exposed.

Propaganda is separated from history and false accounts revealed.

The United Citizens of Earth embark on their most audacious plot yet, to uncover the truth about the Veekerens.

The Vinctalin Legacy: 0.0015% (humans and aliens learn about one another)

Book 10 Alien (human-looking Vinctalin experiment on Earth Humans)

Alien abductions become a reality on Earth, but these are far from Roswell grey, though they are immune to the pain they inflict on their specimens.

Meanwhile, whilst touring harvested worlds Alex and his companions encounter halfway-to-human Vinctalin who seem to proffer friendship. Even so, from one perspective all Vinctalin have more in common with the humans of Earth than established, once trusted, allies.

Book 11 Integration (bloody conflict follows attempts to integrate)

There are two new and mysterious races of Vinctalin on Earth.

While Pakow Lam Fellen launches a spectacular retaliatory attack on one group, the other covertly observes the scene of awesome vengeance. When those conflicts finally are resolved the United Citizens of Earth re-establish the scheme for integrating Vinctalites and Veekenites in one harmonious society.

Fate conspires against them in many forms ranging from a very real and horrific reason for that old Vinctalite taboo, through outrageous theories of treason, to an abominable, unthinkable religion.

Book 12 0.00075% (Pakow's personal search leads to global destruction) For the first time ever the Emperor sacrifices prudence in favour of the fervour of a quest.

And two entire worlds pay the price.

One is utterly destroyed while the other is saved by a spectacular long-shot scheme put into action by one man who no longer follows the old rules.

The Vinctalin Legacy: Awakening (millenia of history revealed)

Book 13 Covert Operations (Jonathan sets clan against clan in galactic war)

Who is the enigmatic beauty worming her way into Alex's life by caring for his son?

What is the true identity of Jacob's old friend who seems to know more about his hallucinations than he does?

And who has the ability to revive the dead?

All these puzzles rest uneasy with the allies as Pakow begins a war the like of which this galaxy has never before seen.

Book 14 Miss Kitty (humans seek sanctuary as new enemy appears from the ether)

They have heard so many stories now that the humans of Earth are understandably sceptical when told their ancestors did not in fact originate on this planet.

However, there is an unsettling ring of truth tying that claim to the notion that Jacob Stanzini is attracting a spectral being who may be merely an initial scout for a potentially annihilative incursion into this world.

Book 15 Humanity (astronomical battles, mysteries and answers)

This is not a story of chance but one of the legacy of a bioengineer who made one colossal error.

When Halbolival created its own slave armies it failed to realise the nature of the source of the majority DNA utilised in that diabolical project. And it was ignorant of the existence of that same DNA in one planet harvested by its clan.

By bringing together the slaves created in its laboratories with the progeny of ancient settlers on Earth, Halbolival set the scene for the only creditable resistance to Vinctalin rule in the galaxy.

The Vinctalin Legacy: Legacy (this novel has a unique association with The Vinctalin Legacy series) Set five thousand years in the future, planet earth has become a sparsely populated, arid wilderness.

Most of the people have joined pacifist sects flying under the banner of heroes from the past who, they believe, fought off an alien invasion.

One of these peace-loving sects is at odds with the others, adhering to the belief that the terrible conditions endured on earth are a result of human negligence.

The remaining humans are an alliance of non-pacifist, non-believers who have been pushed to the desolate fringes of the habitable region.

Aggression turns to war with the sects uniting in defence of what has become a reasonably good life.

The dramatic climax reveals the truth of who was responsible for the apocalypse.

DCZ: Designated Conservation Zone (featuring multiple narrators)

The icebergs are melting. The weather is weirding. Sea levels are rising. Animals are going extinct. All this, yet the population of the world doesn't seem to care. Enough is enough and somebody needs to do something. This is when Gaia steps in and takes control.

No more pointless global warming conferences and targets. Gaia has access to a new energy weapon that uses ultrasonics to reshape the world. And they are not scared to use it.

On an individual level this means that the lives of people like former war correspondent David Carew will change beyond what they could ever have imagined.

Pagan: The Rise of the Haliorunnae (culmination of centuries-old war)

What do you really think witches are?

I doubt you're right.

They're much more numerous, powerful and scary than that.

Forget toads and revenge.

Think war and victory.

It took generations of breeding to make the King of the Haliorunnae.

They've waited thousands of years to finally see their ancient enemy defeated.

And the enemy?

Do you think you have a concept of goblins, ghosts and hive workers?
Well, think again.
Everything here is new.

Pagan: The Trials of the Haliorunnae (who rules the world?)
Sequel to Pagan: The Rise of the Haliorunnae
How do humans fare following the victory of the Haliorunnae over their enemy?
Jean-Louis Rusch, bred to be the most powerful Haliorunnae king ever, discovers that he does not feature large in the long-term ambitions of his creators.
And he has another enemy from within. Sybil.
If either of the women succeeds in their plans Louis' relatively tame control of the human world will give way to evil.
And disorder.
Which he hates.
He therefore enlists the aid of one group of humans who he believes could successfully defeat both his grandmother and Sybil.
The Marshal of a timeless order of knights whose main aim lies in the future, is ready to sacrifice his life to save humanity from destruction in this age.

Following Meltdown (collapse of society in changing world)
Herein is described a chilling, all too possible Dystopian future heading into anarchy.
The pandemics have run their course and day to day survival has taken a downturn.
The one-time vet recently conscripted into teaching school, opts out.
In his new life he makes a horrific discovery.
It is one that enables him to set into motion the means to oust a would-be god: the author of the world's terrible suffering.

Habitat (Is this sanctuary? Or is it merely a container?)
Imagine where the science of synthetic biology could lead.
Now imagine you live in a safe haven. A place where every act, every thought you have, is protected by the rules. A place where the Keepers of the Rules maintain a serene lifestyle for the good of all. A place where you are kept ignorant of the existence of monsters.
Except
This place is not safe for you.
This is Outer Shell Engineer, Rhys Buchanan's, position. Isolated by choice, knowing his job description involves an underlying inevitability of an early agonising death, he is beyond resentment.
There is only one free choice remaining.

The Smile (When taken from her home, Faehan learns harsh truths)

Abrins Wife knows no other life. Obedience to men, drudgery and severe punishments are, for the women of Kalvry's Fort, normal. Obsequiousness to husbands, fathers, brothers and sons, is seemly.

That is until the day she is kidnapped; snatched out of the centre of the fort, reeled up on a rope and flown away.

From this time on she is known by the name her mother blessed her with: Faehan. Here in the City she acquires skills forbidden to her in the fort, has privileges she had never hoped for and gradually comes to understand the injustices suffered by generations of women in the farming communities.

While her new friends are hoping she will help them attain their liberal aims she has only one desire. She must rescue her children from their brutal father.

Cacodaemus: A Guy Edrich Story (First in the trilogy: A tale told in dual narrative.)

Guy

As a child, I held a concept of another, a non-corporeal life which, as an adult, I could no longer perceive.

When I was left as the only defender of the human race, I began to grasp the concept of Parfait. I was hit by a tidal wave. A torrent of fluid motion I had no name for. It was beyond vocabulary.

Jerome

'There are millions of them all over the world.'

'No way,' I breathed.

'Oh yes!' she grinned, 'millions! Can you imagine the mayhem they're causing? People will be hunted, mutilated and killed by demons.'

Eventually a small human population will survive, hidden from the prowling devils. And we will come out of hiding to claim our slaves.'

Autarkhos: A Guy Edrich Story (The second in the trilogy is multi-narrational)

A tragic incident filmed for viewing on social media exposes the truth of post takoloshe suffering along with vast gains by some humans in this world. Guy Edrich, floundering in a maelstrom of expanding psychic faculties, attempts to establish equilibrium by re-establishing his old vocation.

Amduscias: A Guy Edrich Story (The conclusion of the Guy Edrich trilogy has multiple narrators)

Many humans believe there are angels now on earth; here to protect humans from any further demon invasions. However, as the 'angels' become more voracious in satisfying their needs some begin to recognise this as yet another demon invasion.

So, This is Christmas...And what have you done? (Hilarious, five star, novella. Ideal Christmas stocking filler.)

This is the story of one man's fight against the evils of product placements.

Hugh Brent is a man at the end of his tether. When his boss fires him just before Christmas his life changes. His son needs him but Hugh gets drawn into the dark underworld of sneaky advertising and so an intriguing story begins.

...you will love it or hate it!

We'd be delighted to hear from you- contact us on www.vinctalin.com

Star ratings and/or honest reviews on Amazon, are always welcome.