

Centres of Subversion

[Note to readers: The opening paragraphs in blue were written as an idea's prompt by a lady called Sue, who is part of a writing group to which I belong. The words in black within those paragraphs are my own additions, as is the remainder of the story. I am grateful to Sue for the prompt.]

It was so good to be back in the bookshop!

I browsed through the new selections tables, drifted along the shelves, and lingered in the children's sections at the back of the shop, enjoying listening to the children's choices and their parents' encouraging suggestions.

I selected a couple of volumes and headed towards the big brown sofa. There were new cushions – one with a beautiful tiger gazing out at people going by, one with a monkey halfway up a tree, and... Oh, how lovely, someone had brought in a branch and perched a beautiful cockatoo on it. It was perfect.

Annie grinned as she passed by with another stack of volumes. 'Welcome back, Miranda – great, isn't it? Sorry we can't offer coffee anymore.'

I was deep into the first book when the first crash sounded from the front of the shop...

What! They weren't supposed to be starting here!

'What was that, Mummy?' I heard a small voice wail. Others began to join in the cry.

'I – I don't know, darling. Nothing to worry about, I'm sure.'

I could have told them that, on the contrary, it was something to worry about indeed. But I was too busy getting rid of the evidence, stuffing my books back onto the shelves, any shelves where there were gaps, and casting around for a way out.

Maybe the back door... But then, the second crash happened, from that direction, and I was trapped.

Thank all the stars the shop was partitioned. I was, for the moment, hidden from view. Not for long, though.

The cries and wails had turned to screams, and I could hear harsh voices yelling for quiet. In the front, Andrew, Annie's husband, was asking, 'What's going on? Why have you come crashing in here like this?'

Captain Flynn's voice was clipped and monotonous, reciting the instructions given to him. 'By order of the People's Party, all bookshops and libraries are closed with immediate effect. Their licenses are revoked, and their properties are to be destroyed. Their staff and customers are to be taken for interrogation.'

‘But – But – Surely the closure order was only temporary? Just a few weeks, while the Party checked our paperwork was in order.’

‘Yes,’ Annie added. ‘And it was lifted. Yesterday. That’s why we’ve reopened today.’

I was busy with my own ‘But’. *But why were they here so early? Their orders were to start at the other end of the city. It should have been hours before they made it this far. Time aplenty for me to indulge in one last read-fest in my perfect place and atmosphere before the curtain came down. And with Annie and Andrew not knowing who I really was, I was risking nothing. Now, though...*

‘Permission to reopen is rescinded. Bookshops and libraries are centres of subversion. Material injurious to the public good is known to circulate from these places...’ Like the goon he was, he began to recite his instructions again.

‘But that’s ridiculous!’ Andrew interrupted. ‘Hell-fire and damnation, you destroyed the coffee machine and the soft furnishings when you closed us down before, because you thought they might be concealing “subversive materials”, so-called. And you checked every book in stock to make sure it was only fiction we were selling.’

Keep arguing, Andrew, I thought. I was still looking round for escape.

‘Fiction is now known to contain subversive material. It will be destroyed. You will be taken...’

I stopped listening. An idea had struck me. A desperate idea, but I was in no position to dismiss it.

I was staring at a section of the wall between two of the bookcases. A small section, but...

‘It’s ludicrous!’ Andrew was yelling; ‘Moderate your attitude,’ Flynn was barking; Annie was sobbing; in the back the children were still screaming, the mothers too, what fathers were present were protesting loudly, as they were rounded up to be transported to headquarters; the soldiers herding them out were still yelling for quiet; any noise I made would be lost in the hubbub, this was going to be extremely unpleasant, but it was now or not at all...

I stood in front of the section of wall I’d marked, turned myself away from it; and then, closing my eyes, I launched myself backwards, head first, with all the force I could muster...

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‘Major Stevens?’ I woke to find myself being shaken roughly. It took me a few seconds to remember what I’d done; then I groaned, I hoped convincingly. Certainly it was only partly feigned – my head felt as if several trip-hammers were beating a tattoo inside it.

‘Major Stevens?’ the voice said again. I opened my eyes to see Captain Flynn hovering over me, his forehead creased in a frown of what looked very much like suspicion. I winced, to let him see how injured I was. He stopped shaking me, and stood back.

‘What – What happened?’ I groaned.

Annie and Andrew were behind him, two soldiers flanking them, rifles poised. I gave another convincing groan and tried to raise my head.

‘No, don’t move,’ Annie said, the concern in her voice mirroring her expression. Before the soldiers could intervene, she stepped forward and took one of the cushions from the sofa, then placed it under my head.

‘We were clearing the shop, as instructed, and found you here, unconscious,’ Flynn said. The frown was still on his face. ‘May I ask what you were doing here, Major?’

I gave a frown of my own, as if trying to remember. In the background, I became aware that the screams and cries of the children and their parents had stopped – I must have been out a while, they were obviously well on their way to the interrogation rooms. ‘I – I’m not sure...’

Then I allowed my eyes to spring wide, and my mouth to drop. ‘Yes – Yes, I remember. I was over in the square, opposite the shop. Keeping an eye on the place. I’d heard there were members of a particular dissident group using it as a meeting place.’

‘But Major – you aren’t wearing uniform,’ Flynn said.

‘No – No. I – I didn’t want to attract attention, so I changed into civilian clothing.’ Thank the stars I’d recovered enough to think quickly.

Annie gave a gasp and interjected, as if trying to catch up with the conversation, ‘Miranda? He called you “Major”? You’re a soldier?’

Flynn turned to her, drawing his pistol as he did so. ‘What did you call her? Miranda?’

‘Yes.’ Annie’s face was pale – I could see she was on the verge of collapse. Beside her, Andrew wasn’t faring much better. He also had the marks of violence on his face – his protests must have been too long and too strident. ‘That’s what we know her as – Miranda. She’s been a regular customer for maybe two, three years.’

I put on a look of disgust. ‘That’s a lie, and they know it. Why – they don’t even know my name.’

‘What?’

Flynn was watching the two of them closely. ‘This is Major Lucinda Stevens, of the People’s Army. Who is this “Miranda” you talk of?’

‘But – She is.’ Annie pointed at me, obviously bewildered.

‘The woman’s a liar,’ I snapped. ‘I remember full well what happened now. I was watching the shop, as I said. And at some point someone must have sneaked up behind me – that’s it, I remember that he’ – I pointed an accusing finger at Andrew – ‘disappeared from view. I guess it must have been him. Hit me, then dragged or carried me in. And then, I woke with you all here.’

Flynn raised his pistol. 'Is this true?' he barked.

'N – No,' Andrew stuttered. His face had turned as pale as his wife's. 'We were here all the time. She – She came in, she was a customer, she –' He ground to a halt.

'They're lying, Captain,' I said for the third time. I raised myself up on my elbows. I could see Flynn was hesitant, unsure what to believe. I had to make his mind up quickly. 'Look – here, on the back of my head. You can see the trauma area.' And indeed, there was a sizeable lump, I could feel it, and thanked my stars again that I'd had the sense to make my injury convincing.

'They've committed violence against an officer sanctioned by the People's Party,' I continued. 'There's only one punishment for that. And –' this was the make-or-break point. If my next sentence didn't force him to act immediately, I could be in for some rough interrogation myself, and there was a chance that corroborating evidence from those now in captivity could condemn me '– *anyone* who allows them to get away with it may be judged to be in collaboration with them. Do you understand?'

He gave me a hard, hard look. Then his mouth tightened. 'I understand, Major.'

He turned away again, and there was a shot from his pistol. Then another. And I knew that I'd won.

*

'So why did you start at this end of the city?' I demanded as we were preparing to leave. 'My orders were to clear the east side first – there are far more bookshops and libraries there.'

In the square, the books from the shop were heaped up ready for destruction. The sofa, the cushions, the branch and the cockatoo were mixed into the pile, and I saw the faces of the tiger and the monkey staring at me in accusation. People hurried by, anxious not to be caught up in what was going on, but I saw similar expressions from them too. I turned away and concentrated on Flynn.

'I also believed that there were particular troublesome elements in this shop, Major,' he replied. 'I used my initiative, thinking that we needed rid of them first. It seems that I was correct in my belief.'

He gave me a sideways glance, and I knew then that he knew. And I knew that his hesitancy before had been nothing to do with not knowing what to believe, and everything to do with deciding how to act. And I also knew that from now on, I was in his debt.

'You did well, Captain,' I told him.

'Thank you, Major.'

Outside, flames were already beginning to lick around the bottom-most books. Annie and Andrew were the last two objects hauled out of the shop. As we left, they were being added to the top of the pile.