

Chapter 1

"Have you ever had your car nicked?"

Charles Atton tilted his newspaper forward and looked over it at the man opposite. He never liked people who tried to strike up conversations on the train.

"No, thank goodness," Atton replied with a gentle smile. He quickly folded his newspaper, took a pen out of his jacket pocket and jotted FIZZOG in the Quick Crossword.

"I have," said the man.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Atton said. He checked the clue for the squares he had filled in. *Expressions*. That was a bit close. Still, those zeds could offer a bit of a challenge if misused properly. Dana Burkitt's new self-help book *Solving Life's Puzzles* had advised, "If you're not satisfied with the clues in the crossword of your life, make up your own answers". He was doing his best.

"You should be."

Atton scrawled AZGARD at the side of the grid and added a question mark.

"Ah, what's the use. You're not listening to me."

Bingo, thought Atton. *The bloke has got the message*. He reduced the number of squares by colouring in the top one. That left him just enough for ZORBA. His eyes strayed to the window and identified the familiar clumps of hills through the failing light. That meant he would only have to put up with the man for a few more minutes. He looked at the man's dim reflection. Tall, over six feet. Wide-shouldered. Nice enough suit, couple of years' fashions ago. Now then, what to do with that letter A.

"Do you often travel on this train?"

Atton looked across the carriage in a mute request for support from his fellow passengers. They ignored him. A young woman pressed the buttons on her mobile. A man in a grease-spotted kagoul stared sullenly

into middle-space. Clearly nobody was planning any eye contact with the talkative stranger or the shortish man with the odd moustache.

"Quite frequently," Atton said. "When I've been to London, you know."

"I'm only asking cuz I don't want to miss the next station," said the man.

Atton glanced at his watch. "Plenty of time. About two minutes."

"Lovely, thanks."

The man turned his attention to the view outside the window. He didn't appear to have anything else to say. Atton wrote ARTICULATI before he ran out of squares.

"Ah well, better get my suitcase, don't want to forget that," the man said suddenly. He reached up to the luggage rack. The train lurched into a sharp bend. The man stumbled, half-landing on Atton.

"Geez, sorry about that," he said, sitting back down. "Nothing broken, I hope?"

"Just the silence," Atton muttered.

"Eh?"

For a brief moment Atton thought he saw something feral in the man's face. He dismissed the thought. *Just resentment.* "Losing your balance, it's easily done, the way the tracks are these days. Hardly a smooth journey, is it? To be honest it's probably best to leave your case until the train arrives." He clicked his pen closed. "In fact, here we are."

The station platform streamed slowly past the window. Atton got to his feet and hurriedly stuffed his pen and newspaper in his briefcase, hoping to put some distance between himself and the man.

"See ya," said the man as the six passengers who had disembarked made for the station car park.

I hope not, Atton thought. He walked towards his car - or the space where he had parked it that morning. The space was empty. His car had gone.

Atton looked around the small car park. A woman got into the passenger seat of a car and was driven off by her husband. The Jamesons, he knew them vaguely. They'd been very kind to Daphne. There was a chirp as the talkative man unlocked the boot of his Volvo. A young couple sped past in their Suzuki Vitara, scattering gravel. The man in the kagoul wheeled his bike through from the station platform, mounted it and wobbled off up the drive to the road, a dynamo light providing a cigarette's brightness.

The Volvo reversed to where Atton was standing. The window slid down. "You waiting for someone?" asked the man.

"My bloody car's been stolen!" Atton exclaimed.

"No. You sure?"

"Yes! I parked it here this morning. This space. I always use it if nobody else has beaten me to it. It's the quickest space for the exit, you see, you don't need to manoeuvre around any other vehicles. "

"That's not your car down there, is it? Might've rolled down the slope or something?" the man suggested brightly.

Atton looked at the green Allegro rusting under the only light in the car park.

"No of course not. That one's got two flat tyres and there's a buddleia in the driver's seat. Been there for months. I'm going to call the police." Atton reached into his jacket pocket. He tried the other pocket. Side pockets. He crouched down and opened his briefcase. "My bloody mobile phone's gone too!"

"Perhaps you left it in your car, mate?"

"Yes, maybe... no, that's ridiculous. I used it this afternoon. I couldn't borrow yours, could I? Emergency calls are free, wouldn't cost you anything."

"Sorry mate, I don't own one. Radiation, y'know? I could offer you a lift..."

Atton shook his head. "No, thanks all the same, but I'd better stay in the area until the police get here. There's a phone box just up the road, it won't be any trouble."

"Right you are. Hope you don't have too long to wait for the Old Bill." The man swung his car around and disappeared up the slope.

Atton picked up his briefcase and trudged away from the station. He crossed the road and walked towards the phone booth. Chips of glass crunched under his feet. The receiver swung from its cable, moaning gently. Atton lifted it to his ear and pressed the 9 key repeatedly. The phone gasped each time and then became silent.

He set the receiver on its cradle, buttoned up his jacket and set off for the village. *How easy it is to disconnect a man. Take his car and communications away from him and what's he got left? Hmm, might be an idea worth pursuing for the next Management Metaphors column.*

Atton thought back to his crossword puzzle as he walked. He wondered whether other kinds of puzzle could be solved in unconventional ways. *There's no way it would work with a Dot-to-Dot puzzle. One thing has to connect up with the next to see the full picture. Like a stolen car. A stolen mobile. A vandalised payphone. And now...*

Around the next corner, Atton was not particularly surprised to see the lights of a parked car on the road ahead of him. *Might as well get it over with.*

He reached the Volvo, opened the passenger door and got in, hoping desperately that he was not about to disturb a courting couple.

"Hello again," said the talkative man. "Glad you could join me. I thought you'd got lost there for a few minutes." He started the engine. "Where can I take you?"

"I was going to the village, but perhaps you could take me to my house? It's just over five miles. And I expect you want to tell me what all this is about?" Atton asked.

"About? I just thought I'd better stop and wait for you, just in case there was a problem. I'm helpful like that. Samaritan, anybody'll tell you. Dark round here, innit?"

Atton clamped his briefcase to his chest. In the management book which he had rewritten and republished under different titles throughout his career (most recently *Why Can't The Spots Change The Leopard?*), he always advised friendliness towards employees who were behaving oddly.

"What do you do? You're new to this area, I take it?" he began.

"Insecurity."

"What?"

"I'm in security. Consultant, y'know? Just here for a few days, setting up."

"Ah."

The man drove on, no longer so talkative.

Atton tried again. "I'm Charles Atton. You are?"

"David Wislon. Like Wilson only with the letters the other way round."

"Right." Atton nodded. A nice, straightforward name. "I'm a business consultant myself. Amazing how we're all consultants these days, eh?" He permitted himself a small chuckle, but the man did not take it up. "To differentiate myself I like to think of my role as 'company therapist'. I sort out businesses when things start to go wrong."

"The left turning here, isn't it? By the church?" The car swung into a narrower road.

"Yes, that's it." Atton clutched his briefcase more tightly. "Seems you know exactly where you're going."

"Think of it as a lucky guess, Charlie."

"*Sharl*," Atton muttered. He was sensitive about his name. "It's pronounced Sharl. Well, talking of lucky guesses, I'm guessing you had my car stolen."

"I told you that on the train, Sharlie, but I believe you're catching on."

"And I assume that when you lost your balance you also helped yourself to my phone from my jacket pocket? You've obviously been very keen to get me here. It would be nice to know why. Some sort of proactive Good Samaritan, perhaps?"

"Your working out is fine so far, Sharlie. Surely you can do the rest?"

Atton shook his head. "If it was murder or robbery you could have done it in the car park and you wouldn't have gone to such lengths to make yourself known to me on the train. If you were looking to burgle my house you could have done that when you knew I was in London. You knew that as well, I imagine?" He hoped Wislon might get cocky.

"I had to make sure I could meet you on the train back," Wislon agreed. "But anyway, this is now, and we really ought to be talking about that-was-then. A few months back to be precise. When you finished your project at the Ogham Institute. One of your biggest managerial failures, as you agreed at the time."

Atton frowned. "I don't see the connection. And anyway, I think you'll find that I simply agreed that we did not meet all of the required objectives, and as a result I waived my right to the bonus payment. No results, no payment. It's the straightforward way I work."

"Money isn't the issue, Charlie. You also agreed that public discussion of the matter was not appropriate. So my employers were a bit miffed when they read that article you wrote in *The Independent* a fortnight ago about your new management orthodoxy. 'Some problems have no solutions', you called it. All fine until we find you've changed your mind and you want to talk about Ogham - in fact it's the foundation of your exciting new ideas. I expect you did describe 'em as they are exciting and new? You usually do."

"All companies know when they bring me on side that I reserve the right to use my work with them in case studies -"

"And the rest. You're chuntering on about Ogham, you're giving seminars on it and it gets pride of place in the pre-publicity for your next book."

"That's because it's been one of the biggest revelations of my career. My conclusions could be important and essential in guiding business development in today's economy. We have to accept that we can't solve every single problem, that we can still be profitable if we cut our losses and move on."

"That's exactly what you should of done, Charlie. You should of cut your losses and moved on. You reckon you're a bit of a guru, don't you? A safe pair of hands, someone who can help companies out. But if you keep banging on about Ogham's difficulties, the only result is, business will people see you in a different light. Not a trouble-shooter, more a trouble-maker. Someone who doesn't solve problems, just causes them. A few words in the right corporate ears from us and it'll be bye-bye to your career and retirement in the Canaries, hello part-time work and a pet budgie. Can't say it sounds like a smart move to me." He grinned. "Your new book. *Dare to Fail, Dare to Succeed*, that's the title, yeah?"

Atton grunted.

"My employers say that if you want to dare to succeed in the future, it might be better to dare to keep your trap shut. Otherwise..." Wislon paused melodramatically.

Atton yawned loudly into the silence. "I expect you want me to ask if that's meant to be a threat, so you can say yes. Bit of a cliché, don't you think?"

"Plenty of truth in clichés, Charlie, so don't knock 'em. Look, you're an intelligent geezer, you understand about cause and effect. You have it in your power to make it easy for yourself. Whereas we can make it very difficult. The way you should think is, if we have the resources to make your car vanish without anybody noticing, what will our next action be if you don't co-operate?"

"Don't tell *me* how to think."

The man drove between the pillars that marked the entrance to Atton's driveway. Atton stared out of the windscreen at the object illuminated by the Volvo's headlights.

"My car."

"Certainly looks like it."

Atton opened the door of the Volvo. "You do realise I'm going to call the police. When I get inside my house."

Wislon held his fist up to his ear, thumb and little finger extended. "Hello, is that the police?" he asked in a high-pitched voice. "I'd like to report my car stolen." He switched to a gruff baritone. "When did you last see your ve-hi-cule, sir?" Back to the high-pitched voice. "Just now, it's parked outside my house." Wislon raised an eyebrow. "They're hardly likely to treat it as a priority, are they? More likely to assume that you just forgot you didn't drive it out to the station this morning. I expect there'll be a taxi driver who remembers picking you up."

Atton got out of the Volvo and was surprised when Wislon did the same. "Looks just the way it did when you left it this morning. Hold on, what's that?" He knelt down by the back wheel, scraped the stone chippings with his fingers and offered something to Atton. "This your mobile? You must of dropped it."

"Thank you," said Atton. He started. "Hold on, why am I thanking you?"

"Brought you here, didn't I? Reunited you with your possessions?" Wislon got back into his Volvo and wound down his window. "Think on, Sharlie. Stop talking about Ogham and all the problems will go away. And as for tonight's escapade, I'd strongly advise you against contacting the police. They'll be very interested in the bloodstains on the back seat of your car if you do." He reversed, turned, reversed again and headed down the driveway.

Atton shivered and went into his house. He emerged a few minutes later wearing a thick jersey and carrying a torch which he shone through

one of the side windows. As he had suspected there was nothing on the leather upholstery. The threat had obviously been intended to keep him safely indoors until daylight. Atton opened the car door and got into the driving seat. He turned the ignition key and it started after its usual two hiccups. He wondered how they had managed to start it without keys, but a glance at the mileage counter showed that it hadn't advanced. Probably brought back on a breakdown truck.

So, what to do... Atton edgily drummed his fingers on the steering wheel then abruptly put the car into gear and drove to the village. He parked near the churchyard and walked towards the Crown. The Volvo stood in the pub car park, empty. Wislon was probably in the pub, having a drink or calling his supervisors. Atton felt too weary to find out. He briefly considered damaging the Volvo or letting out the air in its tyres, but knew the noise could bring somebody out. He settled for memorising the registration number and then trudged back to his car.

Am I really going to let people push me around? he said to himself as he drove back. For now the answer had to be yes. Truly, some problems do not have solutions.

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Woolcote Brown looked at his screen. He lived in the hope that one day it would display some unexpected message that would lead to him being whisked away into a world where he would discover that everything was run by computers. Exactly like this one except that you got given a free pair of trendy sunglasses.

His screen told him what callers would say and what he would say back. It told him to transfer money from one account to another. It told him to pay their bills. It told him to smile while he talked to customers he would never meet and who did not care who he was so long as he was friendly and took their orders without personality.

"I'm sorry," he smirked, "you no longer have adequate funds in your account for that transaction. Have you ever considered how easy it would be to consolidate the money you owe into one convenient monthly payment? The Bank is currently offering a special introductory interest rate on all new loans, would you like me to set one of those up for you?"

The caller was very grateful for the upsell. The Bank drew strength from her projected interest repayments and was happy. Woolcote smiled broadly as he greeted his next customer and felt no emptiness in his heart.

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Thirty-seven calls later, Woolcote's shift ended. He uncoiled the headset and ruffled up his hair. Just time to check his e-mail. His screen told him about the importance of virus protection. It told him that the Bank was concerned about security so employees should take good care of their keycards. It told him that the Bank was concerned about circulation of unauthorised e-mails such as jokes which reduced productivity and caused strain on the e-mail system. It told him that he should report to see Mr Vanch for a meeting in a fortnight's time.

That's it then, said Woolcote's paranoia as he walked to his car. The rumours are true, job cuts are coming and you're at the top of the list. Probably so high that your name even appears above the title "People we must get shot of at all costs".

Typical of Vanch to want to sack you face to face, his paranoia continued chattily as he drove. Just so he can get the satisfaction of seeing the look on your face. Doing it by e-mail or text message wouldn't be enough for him, oh no. And fancy leaving you fourteen days to simmer away worrying about it. The man's a master of his art.

Woolcote had had a few run-ins with Mr Vanch over the years he had worked at the Bank, most of them by e-mail. Vanch apparently believed

that Woolcote lacked imagination, motivation and dedication. He was not far wrong, but so far Woolcote had managed to side-step the regular restructuring operations the Bank indulged in from time to time to keep itself amused. He flitted from one department to another, from branch work to back-office to call centre. Never quite fitting in, never quite settling in, yet never enough of a problem to be got rid of.

Until now, he said to himself as he slammed on the brakes to avoid the car in front. "You should have gone through those lights! They were only on Amber!" he bawled at the driver, safe in the knowledge that she could not hear him. "Now we're going to have to wait! I wanna get home!"

The lights were red. The air was blue.

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The voice of Charles Atton boomed out of the speakers in Ann Thorpe's car.

"When the Queen came into my garden I took my trousers down. She agreed that was a splendid idea although she stopped short of helping me."

The lights changed and Ann Thorpe drove onto the slip road as the laughter of Atton's audience subsided. She suspected that the sound engineer might have boosted the volume of the audience's response a little.

"How can this be?" Atton continued. "Ignoring the obvious, of course."

Thorpe joined the motorway.

"Is there a puddle, and he's like Francis Drake with the cloak?" said one of Atton's seminar attendees.

"Hmm, possible. You, over there?"

"Is it some kind of card-playing slang for Poker or Bridge or something? Queen of Hearts, maybe?"

"You're certainly thinking differently. But not correctly."

“Is it a queen wasp, and it fancies you?”

“No,” Atton interrupted hastily, mentally cursing the Rule of Three. “Any other thoughts? Stumped? Well then, what if I tell you that my washing was hanging out to dry in my garden on the day of the Queen’s visit, and just as she arrived it came on to rain...”

The audience unburdened itself of various ahs.

“You see, it isn’t a question of thinking the unthinkable. Instead, it’s a matter of thinking the unthought. Getting the hang of it? Excellent, we are all consultants now. Let’s try another one –”

Ann Thorpe reached out and switched to another CD. Abba Gold was better for driving in slow-moving traffic. But she had heard enough to know she would enjoy dealing with Charles Atton.

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This is it, then, said Woolcote’s paranoia. Time for the chop, and I’m not talking about mixed grills. I’d like to say you’ll be missed around here, but let’s face it, you won’t. Nobody likes you. I’m your only friend.

Woolcote knocked on the door, dislodging a large plaque that read *J Vanch, Area Manager*. Woolcote quickly scooped it up from the floor and pressed it back on the door, hoping it would be sticky enough to stay in place.

Looks a bit wonky to me, said his paranoia. Reckon they’ll dock some of your pay-off for that.

After some twenty seconds Woolcote decided that Vanch couldn’t have heard him and knocked again.

“I said come in!” roared a voice.

Thoroughly unsettled, Woolcote tentatively opened the door and stepped through.

Vanch had carefully arranged the lighting to confront visitors with a vast expanse of darkness. There was a single halogen light in the centre

of the ceiling to illuminate Vanch's desk. It was a carefully crafted statement that immediately made it clear that Vanch was the one thing that mattered in this room.

Woolcote blinked in the customised gloom and saw the reassuring greeting *Welcome!* displayed on a plaque on Vanch's desk. On the side facing Vanch, the plaque bore the less comforting slogan: *It's your time – so keep the other guy waiting*. Over the years, Vanch had become highly adept at giving the impression that he would always be only too pleased to help his staff in any way he could, whilst actually discouraging them from trespassing on his precious time. This gave him the satisfaction of being thought of as a caring boss by his superiors, without the tiresome necessity of actually having to do anything to merit it.

Woolcote took a faltering step forward and walked into a strategically placed chair. Vanch smiled inwardly and glanced at a plaque screwed to his top drawer: *Always put the other guy at a disadvantage*. The chair worked every time.

As the sound of his employee rubbing a bruised knee reached him, Vanch chose to break the silence. "Please sit down. I think you know where the chair is."

"I, uh," Woolcote began.

Vanch interrupted. "So, Woolcote Brown. How nice to put the face to the name. Now, the Board and I have been watching your progress with interest, and we have been giving a great deal of thought to your future. What, we have been asking ourselves, is the best way that you can serve the Bank? " *Walking under a bus would be a good start*, thought Vanch. He didn't like wasting his time on no-hoper employees. Jumped-up ones at that. What was the Board playing at?

Told you, he wants you to walk under a bus, whispered Woolcote's paranoia. *That's what this meeting is all about. He's probably got one waiting in the darkness. Yes, that's it, they're all in it together. A rationalisation of personnel, that's what it is. A downsizing, rightsizing,*

upside-down-boy-you-turn-me-inside-out-sizing, scaling-down, cutting-back rationalisation implementation.

“Do I have your full attention, Brown?” Vanch enquired. “I do so dislike having to repeat myself.” Vanch had taken Executive Courses in discomfiting other people, and his various strategies were beginning to produce the desired physical effects on Woolcote. It didn’t stop when Vanch left his office, either. According to the testimony of his ex-wife, even dancing with Vanch was “no picnic”. “Forget two left feet, that would have been okay. With Jason it was wrong-footing all evening. By the time the last waltz came along, you felt more like it was the last rites. You were practically hobbling around on crutches with both feet in plaster.” *That put another nought on the divorce settlement*, reflected Vanch bitterly.

Woolcote politely waited for him to continue, studying the way the light shone on his unnaturally glossy hairpiece. Vanch shuddered at the thought of his ex-wife, and turned to Woolcote. “The Bank is planning a certain amount of staff restructuring in the next few months including a new tier of junior middle-management. We naturally thought of your talents and believe you will be a key member of that team. It will be a very important job,” Vanch practically spat with disgust.

“I don’t know quite what to say, Mr Vanch,” Woolcote said. He picked another plaque up off Vanch’s desk and toyed with it. “Thank you. Yes. When you summoned me, I thought – you know...” he drew his finger across his throat.

“Surely not, Brown. You well deserve this promotion, after all the commitment you’ve put in, all those extra hours,” Vanch said indulgently through tightly clenched teeth. He noted with unease that Woolcote was looking at the slogan on the plaque: *Have a successful day!* and hoped that he would not flip the plaque over and read *Your success is the other guy’s failure.*

“There’s more good news, Mr Brown,” he continued, reaching across the desk and removing the plaque from Woolcote’s idle hands. “To prepare you for your new responsibilities, we have decided to send you on a Management Intensive Training and Recreation Experience – which they catchily shorten to ‘MITRE’ training course. It’s scheduled for a week on Monday at the headquarters of ImaginAction. Here, take this thing with you: your appointment details are inside.”

He handed Woolcote a brochure. “Please do not discuss this matter with anybody inside or outside the Bank. This is still a confidential matter until announcements have been made.” Vanch glanced at a small screen. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have several calls to make. And you have several transactions to process. Chop chop, our customers don’t have all day!”

Woolcote got up and extended his hand, which Vanch naturally ignored, so he turned round and started to cross the room. Vanch remembered the words of top management guru Phil. S. Tyne in his recent sell-out seminar – “The guy who lets the other guy leave without a parting shot often ends up being got shot of himself.”

“Mr Brown,” he called after the departing figure, “switch on the light on your way out, would you? I don’t know why you didn’t do it when you came in...” *That always gets them,* he thought with satisfaction.

There was a click, and the light above Vanch’s head went out, stranding him in the cold darkness. “Mr Brown!” he bleated in panic. “Wrong switch! Mr Brown!”

As Woolcote walked back down the corridor he thought he heard the sound of a body crashing over a chair. He opened his brochure.

Being Is Believing

Who do you want to be? A secret agent? A gutsy heroine? A holidaymaker on a Caribbean island? A Top Gun fighter pilot? Whatever your dreams, ImaginAction can make them a reality.

As the world leaders in simulated worlds, ImaginAction have the technology to take you to the places you've always wanted to visit... teach you the skills you need to achieve your business goals... and give you the entertainment or learning experience of a lifetime.

Take few moments now to look through this brochure, and discover the endless possibilities that ImaginAction simulations will offer you.

Woolcote wondered how he would measure up against the others on the training course. *How far you'll fall short, you mean,* said his paranoia. *They'll probably be that group from the fifth floor who always keep you at sneering distance in the canteen.*

Woolcote sighed as the lift chimed and interrupted a Cole Porter number to inform him that this was his floor. With his brochure stuffed tightly under his arm, he walked towards the friendly glow of the screens. Money smiled on him.

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Charles Atton gripped the lectern and looked around the auditorium, taking in every member of his audience. He raised an index finger and jabbed it in the air to signal that he was about to make an important point.

"Some things happen and never get the publicity they ought to. I'm here to help you maximise your business potential, but to begin with I would like to talk to you all about something that happened to me recently. Something that made me evaluate my attitude to business."

He had to admit, it was not the turn-out he had hoped for. Only a week ago an e-mail from the booking company had assured him his conference presentation was "already 3/4 full", but now he wondered if they had meant that 3-4 people had signed up.

“First of all, thank you for coming. Let’s not get distracted by numbers. We’ll all be on first-name terms by the end of this presentation, I’m sure.” He felt a little disconcerted.

“Last year I was contracted to examine the situation at the Ogham Institute, a defence company in Leicestershire.”

A man in a sky-blue shirt started coughing loudly.

“You all right back there?”

The coughing man got to his feet and headed for the exit doors. That brought the attendance down to single figures.

“It was an interesting establishment from a business angle,” Atton continued when the doors had stopped banging at the back of the auditorium. “The State had divested itself of its stake and a seemingly endless series of efficiency measures had been introduced to increase the newly privatised company’s competitive edge. As we all know, efficiency savings invariably disrupt the day-to-day running of a company. In some ways that’s essential. You change the ways ‘things have always been done’ because the way they were done is what brought you to that difficult trading situation in the first place. You lose some of the employees because they put you in that situation.”

He blinked, saw Mike in his mind’s eye for a second.

“But just as disruptive are those changes you don’t plan for. The twists of Fate, if you will, that can damage your business irrevocably.”

He looked down at his notes. The auditorium doors banged.

“Your key workers are the lifeblood of your business. Your most important asset. Ogham’s team had recently lost one of its key staff, and they wanted me to find out why.”

He looked out at the audience and saw Blue Shirt back in his seat.

“I’d like to find out why your presentation doesn’t match the description in the schedule,” Blue Shirt called out. “Driving your Business – the ‘Company Car’ metaphor – when to accelerate and when to brake.”

"I'll be coming to that later," Atton said. He froze. Blue Shirt was not the same Blue Shirt. Not unless he had had a quick shave and grown an extra foot in height. "But I'll note your concern, Mister?"

"Maynard," said the man.

"Maynard," Atton repeated.

"I said Reynard," the man said in an annoyed voice.

"Nice to see you again," said Atton.

"I'm sure I speak for everyone else here when I say I'm your biggest fan, Charlie. So tell us what you have discovered. Is it the Great Sock Conspiracy? Those odd items that disappear in the washing machine, y'know? You swear you put them in but after the cycle's over, where have they vanished to?"

Somebody laughed.

Charles Atton smiled at his audience in an effort to get them onto his side. "That might certainly explain why you appear unable to put a sock in it. Do pipe down. You might learn something."

"I think you're part of it, Charlie," Reynard shouted.

Atton scratched his moustache and suddenly realised that he could turn the discussion back. "All right then, what about the Great Sock Conspiracy? Conspiracy or Sock-up, who can say? Furthermore..." he recalled a phrase he had once read in a copy of *Stationery Trade Gazette* while stuck in a company foyer. "What about The Lever Arch File Famine? Big mysteries both. But I was given charge of a smaller mystery. And at the end of the day..." He faltered. "At the end of the day, I could find no explanation for what had happened. Not even when events repeated themselves. Which is why I find it so odd that a month ago –"

A fire bell started ringing fiercely outside. Bells inside the auditorium immediately took up the tune.

"I was waylaid by that man there –" Atton shouted above the clamour, but he suspected that nobody could hear him.

"Fire alarm! Better clear the theatre!" Reynard called to his fellow attendees. "Come on, Charlie, you too!"

"I'll see you outside!" Atton yelled.

Reynard gave him a thumbs up gesture.

By the time Atton had picked up his laptop, projector and notes, and navigated the route from the backstage area to the building foyer, there was no sign of Reynard or the rest of his seminar delegates.

"Sorry, sir, you'll have to leave the building," he was told by a harassed-looking Meeter-And-Greeter. "Security Alert."

"He's very thorough, isn't he?" Atton said.

"Please move on, sir."

"Better get my socks on?"

She looked puzzled. *Maybe she isn't in on it*, Atton thought. "Okay, I'll need to get in touch with the Conference Organiser about rescheduling my presentation."

"Leave that to us, sir."

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Drifting drizzle beaded on the cover of the brochure. Woolcote smeared it away with his hand and scrutinised the map on the back for the sixth time. "Car Park. I'm here." He nodded to himself. "So." He glanced at the brochure. "So ImaginAction's office should be over there somewhere." He set off in what seemed a reasonable direction.

Five minutes later found Woolcote standing next to his car again. He flicked open the brochure.

As you would expect from the world's foremost Creativity Company, the ImaginAction headquarters are visually stunning. The hybrid gemstone glass exterior was literally "grown" in Malaysian laboratories using organic crystalline technology which creates an glittering, highly polished yet soft

appearance. It's practical, too – it never needs cleaning and small scratches are "healed" within a few hours by the living crystal technology.

"Where is it then? Has it melted in the rain?" Woolcote looked at the photograph of the building, then back at the map. Perhaps the map was upside down. He walked away in the opposite direction.

ImaginAction's security cameras spotted Woolcote several minutes before he found the building. It no longer resembled the photograph exactly. A third of the way up, on the tenth floor, an overhang of new rooms had been added, and there were long glass panes flanking the ground level entrance. As Woolcote approached he was startled by a sudden movement around him. Fearing an attack by a mugger, he spun around, only to be faced by his shocked reflection in the glass. A number of Woolcote Browns ghosted away from him at odd angles, flitting from pane to pane until he entered the building.

Inside, he made for the reception desk. "Ca'elp yoo?" trilled the receptionist. "Yoo got an appointment?"

"Uh, yes," Woolcote said. He peeled a damp piece of paper off the inside of the brochure. "I have a meeting with a Mrs McDool, it says here."

"Ms McDool, right, I'm just ringing up f'you now sir. Sign in... Lovely. Here's your security tag."

Woolcote waited. Eventually a man a few years older than him arrived.

"Here to see Ms McDool, right?" the man said. "Follow me. We'll have to use the stairs – the lift's being serviced."

"What's it like working here?" Woolcote asked. The glass stairs reverberated unmusically under each footstep.

"It's a challenge. Plenty of scope for an ambitious man, with the job-scaring schemes. Job-sharing, I mean." They reached a long corridor. "Two more floors to go."

"Do you get to try out any of the simulations?"

"Not part of my remit. I have more of a go-and-fetch-people, it'll-be-a-nice-break-from-your-desk-work job responsibility."

The second staircase had a slightly duller tone.

"Listen, if you need to get back to work, I can probably find my own way up..." Woolcote said

"This way," the man continued, leading Woolcote up the final staircase. He opened the first door on the left. "Your appointee, Ms McDool," he said.

"Thank you, Scott."

Looking into the office Woolcote noted with startling observation that it was sparsely furnished, with just a desk, two chairs and a potted plant. He had missed the careful sculpting of the carpet: tufts of pale blue-green wool shaped to mimic an ocean of gentle waves. It had been very impressive in the Carpet Art catalogue, but now Ms McDool had to admit it just looked as though it had been ineptly hoovered.

Scott walked away down the stairs. Ms McDool looked up and barked out a surprised "Yes? What are you doing here?"

"Er, Woolcote Brown, I have an appointment. With you. Ms McDool."

"Oh yes. That's right. Come and sit down."

"And you're here for...?" Ms McDool asked in an indifferent tone.

"The MITRE training course," Woolcote offered helpfully.

"That's right," Ms McDool confirmed as though she had known all along. She adjusted her expression. She was trying out a new beauty cream containing spider-silk proteins, and it made her skin feel tight. Especially when she tried to smile.

"You've read our brochure," she stated.

"Oh yes," Woolcote answered quickly, "several times. It's unusual to see something printed rather than electronic these days. I suppose ImaginAction is an unusual company, then?"

Ms McDool shuffled around in her chair, swivelling a bit to relieve the monotony. *How long until lunch*, she wondered to herself.

Woolcote peered at her expectantly. She appeared to have forgotten him. "Could you tell me a little more about the company? ImaginAction, I mean?"

Ah yes, she thought. Why do I feel so sleepy? Perhaps it's his fault, he's not exactly dynamic. "All right. At ImaginAction we specialise in creating artificial worlds that our customers can visit, interact with objects and people, and enjoy positive training experiences or adventures. Virtual Realities, to use a much-overworked and not particularly accurate term. Now as I'm sure you'll agree, Virtual Reality conjures up images of those cumbersome head-sets and gloves of the 1980s. Were you born then? Never mind. We use an entirely different technology based on the old science of phrenology."

"That's bumps on the head, isn't it?" Woolcote asked, remembering the definition from a trivia game he had played once.

McDool's eyelids drooped. She jerked awake and returned to her well-practised spiel. "Yes, bumps on the head. But whereas the Victorian practitioners used them simply to map character tendencies, our research and development department has proved that it is possible to use small electrical impulses on the scalp to influence everything that people perceive of the world around them. Don't worry, you don't feel an electrical shock or anything, the power is too weak and well-targeted for that. This patented ImaginAction technology is combined with a constant stream of sensory data from a dedicated computer system. The result to you is that you will believe you are in another world, with objects you can touch, feel, taste and smell, people you can talk to, places you can go to, all as part of a unique training package. The leadership challenges you face will take place in whichever of our VirtuWorlds you prefer." She blinked slowly, her eyelids closing for too long.

Woolcote blurted out, "That's easy. I'm a big fan of the Cyberpunk genre. I've read a lot of Gibson's books, you see, and seen the films, and I think that's definitely got to be the one."

Might have guessed, thought Ms McDool. "That's okay then," she said, typing a few words on her keyboard. "I guess I've covered most of the ImaginAction side, is there anything particular you'd like to tell us about yourself?"

Woolcote hesitated, wondering where to start on such a fascinating topic.

"Well," Ms McDool interrupted, "that's fine then. We've probably got all we need to know in the HR information the Bank e-mailed us."

"Uh," Woolcote said; Vanch hadn't told him they would send a file over. But of course, Vanch wasn't in the habit of speaking to employees unless he had to. Except to say "You're fired."

"Splendid. Now, the next stage is for you to go to our medical section. Our resident physical technician Dr Leona, will want to do some tests, just to check you're generally fit and healthy."

"That wasn't in the brochure."

"We are a very safety-conscious organisation, Mr Brown. Don't worry, there's nothing intimate." I'll probably see you again tomorrow.

Woolcote nodded again, struggled up from his chair and made for the door.

"Oh, there is one thing, Ms McDool," he said, suddenly remembering the crowd at the Bank. "Who else is going to be in this simulation with me?"

"Nobody else, Mr Brown. It's all down to you. You go in alone. It's more of a test that way."

Woolcote left the room and muttered "That's a relief."

His paranoia chuckled in his head. *Boy, that must mean you're so unpopular, nobody wants to go in the same simulation as you!*

McDool rubbed her eyes and sniffed. Perhaps a quick Power Nap would be all right if she closed the door. She sniffed again. "Aha!" she exclaimed.

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Woolcote followed the signs to the medical lounge. He was welcomed by a pale man with ginger hair and a wrap-around beard like a clown smile.

"Ah, hallo, you must be..." the man consulted his PDA and tucked it into the breast pocket of his white gown. "Woolcote Brown. I'm the doctor here, Dr Leona. We need to do some tests... I'm sure Ms McDool's told you about that. Just to make sure you're in good shape, that's all."

Woolcote confirmed that he was aware of the procedure with what he considered a cool grin.

Leona flinched slightly. "Right, well, in a minute, I'm going to ask you to stand up against this sensor screen. It's cushioned, and it measures your body's responses. I'm just going to put you through a very short simulation to see how you deal with it. Ms McDool's notes say you've chosen our popular Cyberpunk VirtuWorld?"

"That's it, yes," Woolcote said excitedly. It was great to think that he was going to be able to try out one of ImaginAction's simulations on his first day, even if only as part of a medical test.

"Okay..." Dr Leona opened a cupboard and took out a headpiece resembling a large crash helmet. He fiddled with a panel at the side. "Want to take a look?" he offered. "This is what you'll be wearing for the next few minutes. It does its job, although it's not really as sophisticated as the ones we use for the proper VirtuWorlds." He passed it to Woolcote.

Woolcote hefted the headpiece in his hands. It was very lightweight. He flipped it upside down and looked inside. To him, it looked a little like an inside-out hedgehog, row after row of metallic spikes in odd groupings. He tentatively reached a finger into the headpiece and probed one of the spikes, expecting some sort of electric shock. Instead the spike merely

bent under the pressure of his finger. He withdrew his hand quickly and saw the spike return to its former position.

"Okay?" Dr Leona asked.

Woolcote handed the headpiece back with a nod.

"Right. Stand up against the screen, if you would." Dr Leona arranged him fussily. "Now, I'm going to put the headpiece over your head. It'll cover up your eyes, too, but don't worry, your nose and mouth won't be obstructed."

Woolcote felt the screen warm against his chest. Somebody was trying to smear what felt like rubber bristles on the top of his head, he could feel it, he was sure.

Then there was nothing: no vision, no pain, and no thought. Woolcote found himself standing next to a sleek red Ferrari in a dust-blown street. He squinted up into the heavy metallic grey sky. Opening the car's passenger door, he slid in and sat next to the driver. It seemed like the right thing to do.

"So, you the new recruit, eh?" asked the driver. "Okay, baby, let's drive." He slammed a CD into the car's GinSling CD player and revved the engine. The distinctive sounds of the underground hit 'Sampling Kraftwerk's Ansaphone' by Trouble Clef screamed into Woolcote's eardrums as the car tore down the street. The driver took the next corner at 95, although whether that was mph, kph or dB, Woolcote couldn't be completely sure.

"Who are you?" Woolcote wailed above the din.

"Man, you're too much of a stranger to be doing that philosophy stuff with me. For now, I'm the Sombre Hombre. Now quit interruptin' while I'm concentratin'."

Woolcote tried again. "Er, could you just tell me what I'm supposed to be doing here?"

"Yeah, you'n me're goin' for a drive. Then you'n me're gonna make a drop. Leastways, you are. Me, I gotta mind the car. Mr Jankin gets very put out if his property gets lost. Now shaddup."

"This uh, drop, then," Woolcote shouted over blaring klaxons which might equally have been part of the music or the local colour. "What is it?"

The Sombre Hombre took both hands off the steering wheel, reached over to the glovebox, opened it and took out a small plastic Adidas pouch. He chucked it into Woolcote's lap and grabbed hold of the wheel again, turning the car just in time to avoid a collision with a rubbish skip.

"Wouldn't it be better to send it by courier?" Woolcote shouted picked up the pouch.

"That's you'n'me, kid. Mr Jankin don't deal with no amateurs. Anyways, cut the chat. This is our stop."

The car braked hard, jerking Woolcote forward. The close view this gave him through the Autoglass windscreen suggested that it was not a very nice neighbourhood. He slumped back in his seat and winced as the Hombre stopped the engine. Although the CD had stopped with the engine, Woolcote's ears were still doing their best to ring along.

"See that buildin'?" The Hombre indicated a dilapidated tenement block with his thumb.

"Er, yes," Woolcote confirmed.

"Seventh storey. The lift don't work, so you'll have to take the stairs. Ten minutes, kid. If you ain't back by then, I'm outta here."

Woolcote opened the car door and got out, clutching the pouch. He started to cross the street.

"Hey!" the Hombre called after him. Woolcote turned. "Sayonara!" said the Hombre. He took out a luridly-coloured Neil Gaiman graphic novel and began to read it. Woolcote couldn't be sure from that distance, but he thought he could just make out the Hombre's lips moving as he read.

Very helpful, Woolcote cursed. *And such an interesting driving technique, too*. He looked around him. The street was drab and pretty anonymous. Could be where he started out, for all he knew. He could see a gang of kids some way down playing with fire, just like home. He walked up to the door of the tenement and looked at the doorbells, but they were all vandalised and the name-cards next to them were weathered and indecipherable. Woolcote pushed the door. It swung open easily: the Yale lock was broken. So was the door. The steep staircase loomed in front of him. Parts of that were broken too. He began to climb it warily.

"Seventh storey," he commented to himself with an air of finality. Climbing stairs in this simulation was just like walking, he noted; he didn't feel too worn out. Perhaps that would be different in the full-blown VirtuWorld.

After a little exploration he realised that there was only one room left unvandalised on this floor, protected by stainless steel shutters covering the doorway. The name Stevo was sprayed on them.

Woolcote banged the shutters with the flat of his hand. He wondered what to say.

"Uh, Stevo? Open up. Courier from Mr Jankin."

Somewhere three locks buzzed. A small gap appeared in the middle of the shutters as the upper and lower halves parted. Woolcote saw the barrel of a Colt laser pistol poking through the gap, aimed directly at his stomach.

"Deliver," whined the person holding the gun.

Woolcote fumbled for the pouch and poked it through the gap. It stuck half-way. The person on the other side of the shutters snatched it. There was a pause and then the shutters began to open wider, one half falling to the floor, the second moving up towards the ceiling before they stopped short.

"Okay, you can come in," the room's inhabitant whined suspiciously. "but don't go calling me Stevo. Only my friends can call me Stevo and they are all dead. Some days I think I'm dead too. I know you are." Still keeping the gun trained on Woolcote with one small hand, he raised the pouch to his mouth with the other and ripped it open with his teeth hungrily. Woolcote stepped over the lower shutter and walked into the room, amazed at the variety of computer equipment there. A pirated custom console... old-style PCs with massive monitors... ribbons of tape that swished around like whirling dervishes... banks of flashing lights that appeared to serve no purpose whatsoever.

The inhabitant scrutinised the contents of the package. "What's this crap?" he demanded, putting the gun down on a cluttered side table.

"I don't know," Woolcote said. "I'm only the delivery boy." He stifled a smile at Stevo's absurdly long pig-tails.

The inhabitant took a pair of jack-plugs out of the pouch and waved them in Woolcote's face. "Chro-mi-um, deadboy," he said slowly. "I can't use this shit! Jankin knows that. I told him. Gold or titanium. I can't implant chromium! I come out in a rash down my spine. Starting here." He yanked his hair out of the way and fingered a sapphire socket embedded in his ear.

"Perhaps it was all Mr Jankin had in stock?" Woolcote suggested reasonably and slowly backed away.

"Nah, Jankin knows me and my problem. He wouldn't send me chromium. That's why I don't think you come from him. Which means it's well past your dead-time. Sweet dreams."

He snatched up the gun. Woolcote gazed into oblivion for a split second and then leapt over the shutter and out of the room. He careered down the stairs, with his would-be assassin in close pursuit. Woolcote burst through the front door into the street.

"Hombre! Gun the engines! We got company!" he shouted. He looked towards where the Ferrari had been parked, realising with horror that the

Hombre was, as he had warned, outta there. But not quite the way he had anticipated – the automobile was a smoking mass, and Woolcote saw to his horror that there were still a few fractals of flame licking around a charred shape in the driver's seat. Woolcote heard footsteps behind him.

"Well, thank you for that. I'll have the results in due course. You can step away from the screen now." It was Dr Leona. He removed Woolcote's headgear. "Enjoy yourself?" Woolcote examined his sweaty palms and his surroundings with relief. His racing heartbeat began to slow down.

"I think so," Woolcote agreed half-heartedly. The final image of the Hombre stuck in his mind. "But nobody said anything about anyone dying. I, uh, I think I could have been warned about that. I didn't expect... Could I have saved that guy?"

Dr Leona tapped on his PDA screen and thought for a moment. "Yes, you could have. But he wouldn't have thanked you."

"Hmmm." Woolcote's voice drifted away. The 'death' of the Hombre raised unpleasant questions. "Will it be like that in the real simulation?"

"It'll be far, far more extensive than that. You probably realised there's not much more to that particular sim than the street network and the building. I've customised it a little with some of my own detail but I don't have much input into the big ones. "

"That's not quite what I meant," Woolcote persisted. "Could *I* be killed in the full simulation same as the Hombre in that one?"

Dr Leona looked up from his screen and shook his head. "Where you're going, yes and no. Your simulation is intended primarily to be a test of initiative, not survival. ImaginAction's Cyberpunk simulation is particularly suitable for learning how to think on your feet because there are so many false allegiances and double-crosses to take account of. There's risk there – there has to be, otherwise you might not take it seriously. If you're 'killed', your simulation will be terminated and you'll find yourself back here in the ImaginAction building. And you won't score

very highly. There are other simulations where we're not so kind, for government training... but that's not really relevant to this discussion." He broke off. "Now I have to collate these results, so why not take a break. Ms McDool's probably told you that the gym, lounge and canteen are at your disposal. I'll see you in an hour or so for my lectures on what to expect from your VirtuWorld."

Where did you go? asked Woolcote's paranoia. *I was worried about you.*

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Woolcote spent the rest of his day staring into space while Dr Leona outlined key points of ImaginAction's technological breakthroughs in what he believed was an informal lecturing style.

"Can I go to the toilet?" Woolcote asked.

"Sure, it's through there," Dr Leona replied.

"No, I mean as I'm going to be in the VirtuWorld for days..." he let the statement hang in the air.

"Oh, in the simulation? No need. As well as controlling what you feel, our psychoelectric technology – PET – acts on your metabolism, slowing it down significantly. You'll be hibernating, basically, with only your mind active."

That'll be a new experience, said Woolcote's paranoia.

"We're hoping to licence the technology to NASA for future space missions if they ever get the funding. We also make regular checks on your physical state to ensure you're keeping well."

Woolcote then passed some quality time drawing moustaches on the pictures of tanned young people in the ImaginAction brochure, while a livelier Ms McDool explained the role of the Mediator, a computer-controlled character who would act as his guardian and adviser in the simulation.

Woolcote was slightly surprised to discover that as well as going into the simulation alone, he was apparently the only customer scheduled to stay in the guest suite. *Perhaps I'm the only punter here*, he thought as he ate his supper at a small table in ImaginAction's canteen. He wiled away the evening underlining important phrases in his brochure, like *maximising organisational capabilities* and *With ImaginAction you're in safe hands – the safest in the world*.

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"What happens next?" Woolcote asked the following day after a series of physical tests in ImaginAction's gym.

"Well, everything seems to be fine so far," the doctor explained. "Myself and Mrs McDool will meet up later this morning this afternoon to compare notes – so provided there are no problems, and I can't imagine any, you could begin your Simulation this afternoon. Make sure you have a good lunch."

"I never realised things would be so complicated, with all these tests and things. I thought you'd just turn up, plug in and go."

"Oh, that would never do for ImaginAction, Mr Brown. We take great care to ensure the suitability of all our Storynavts. In the VirtuWorld you will only have the same physical capabilities as you do here, so we have to make sure we don't send someone into an inappropriate simulation."

"Makes sense I suppose. Do you need me for anything else or can I get changed?"

"That's the last of the tests. Perhaps you might like to take a look over the Cyberpunk briefing documentation? I'm sure you'll find it useful."

Burgoine Hatred was Itsibitsi Conglomerates' best neuroassassin, Woolcote read. A "most gifted" operative, he farmed viruses out onto the NetWork, harnessing them to the flawed jockeys who made the mistake

of coming too close to the secrets he guarded. Itsibitsi Management believe he was responsible for the collapse of seventeen corporations and two governments before they managed to persuade him to become a company man again.

There's one thing Itsibitsi doesn't like about Burgoine. He's gone missing. Such a disloyal action makes his Managers very uneasy, and that's why they've contacted you. The decryption program they've been running on his personal datalog has thrown up repeated references to an "old friend". Yet security vetting procedures showed he was a total loner when he joined them a year ago.

This is good stuff, Woolcote thought.

Rube has other problems on his mind. He's never heard of Burgoine Hatred, but he's got troubles aplenty. The Ganglands are a fine place to live so long as you're cock of the walk. Rube's going to find that difficult with half his body blown away, a quarter hocked to the pawn merchants to pay for reconstructive surgery and the surviving quarter wasted by designer drugs. He's got one ace up his sleeve, and what that is he isn't telling. Not for money, not even for a new body with error-correcting genes. Maybe for love...

Wow, weird bloke, Woolcote thought.

Thursday evening. In the garish neon shimmer of the karaoke bars permeating Kwangju's notorious West District, fast deals meet fast lives. Acid rain is forecast, so it's going to be a good night for the umbrella stallholders. The flotsam and jetsam of an entire nation bobs to the surface here, and only the quick and the enhanced learn to swim. You're one of the lucky ones for the moment, with a wad of credits in your account and a contract to follow up.

One thing's for sure. Burgoine is out there somewhere in this stinking human heatsink and you're going to find him.

Woolcote sighed with delight. He was looking forward to meeting these guys in the flesh.

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Dr Leona stood by the doorway of McDool's office, as though primed for a quick escape. For some reason he could never quite put his finger on, he always felt slightly sea-sick whenever came into this room.

He was disconcerted to find Ann Thorpe in conversation with Jane McDool. What was Ann Thorpe, head of the Ginsling Corporation, and therefore the Big Boss of Bosses, doing here? He had only seen her once before, at the celebration to mark ImaginAction's 100th Storynaut.

Other than her famous wealth and business intelligence, Ann Thorpe's most famous asset was her hairstyle: described either as spun sugar or steel wool depending on the journalist who was profiling her. Leona found it slightly intimidating for some reason.

Thorpe looked up and welcomed him with a disarmingly wide smile. "Ah, Dr Leona, come and sit down. I hope you don't mind me sitting in on this meeting. It's just a flying visit. As Jane has probably explained to you, this is a very important contact for ImaginAction: the first in what we hope will be a long and lucrative line of training sessions for the Bank. I just wanted to make sure everything was running smoothly. Please, just pretend I'm not in the room and present your report to Jane here."

Leona handed McDool a print-out of his presentation and looked down at the screen of his PDA.

"Certainly. Uh, as you'll see from the notes in front of you, our candidate, Woolcote Brown, is a twenty one year old male –"

Ann Thorpe whisked Leona's notes out of his hand and began to flick through them. He watched her warily.

"Brown has not been subject to any serious illness or major surgery... has performed adequately in the ImaginAction suite of tests, is in reasonable health, blah blah blah, no significant psychological disorders... some unusual activity noted in the temporal lobes, probably not significant... He is perhaps slightly immature in some of his attitudes, as evidenced by his lack of co-operation with the psychometric tests. Therapy might be a useful option here, blah-de-blah-de-blah... Bearing in mind the Cyberpunk scenario he is to enter, I am happy to declare him physically and psychologically suitable. The end." She looked him straight in the eyes, smiled and gave his hands a gentle squeeze. "Tell me, Doctor, what do you really think?"

McDool, who had recently borrowed Thorpe's copy of *Know Thine Empathy: The Magic Of Employee Relations*, nodded slowly.

Leona felt bathed in friendliness, among companions who were warm and receptive to his point of view. How silly of him to have felt that there was any kind of threat in the situation! He found that he wanted to tell them everything.

"The MITRE scenarios," he began. "They are designed to instruct a company's personnel and evaluate their potential. The problem is, I am... well, I am not convinced that this candidate can be instructed, or even that he has much potential. It's a little surprising, I think, that the Bank should select him for an important management function. It's nothing I can put my finger on – he just comes across as a little colourless, spiritless even."

"Brings to mind that joke of Sean O'Buoyant's: he's not top-drawer material, he's slipped down the back and forgotten about," said Ann Thorpe. "I'm not saying that I wouldn't share your reservations if I were in your situation. But there are two factors at work here. The first is that we can't pick and choose the clients we want to work for, not if we want

to grow the business. You think Paintball companies love all their customers? Of course they don't. But they do love the money they bring in. GinSling has become such a successful corporation through an aggressive strategy of serving customers who are happy to pay for its services. All GinSling companies, from Pop-Pal Radio to Inthing computer screens and from Noogle Noodle to ImaginAction, have a duty to comply with that philosophy. Serving customers. Serving shareholders. Serving ourselves. Everybody wins."

"Except the Bank," Leona said.

McDool chipped in. "You're forgetting the second factor Ann mentioned. Suppose you have a new dishwasher."

"I don't, actually," said Leona.

"Just suppose. And you have some lead crystal glassware you don't want to damage. The instructions for your dishwasher say it is safe for glassware, but you're not sure you trust them. You're a scientist, what would you do?"

"I would test it. Not with one of my fine glasses to start with, just a cheap old tumbler that I've had knocking around for ages. Then if that worked out without problems I'd be able to assume it was safe for the more valuable items." He smoothed his beard with his thumb. "Ah. I see."

"We're the manufacturer. We know our 'machine' is safe. The Bank isn't sure yet. They've given us Woolcote Brown to convince them."

"Everybody wins," said Ann Thorpe. "We do because we convince the Bank. The Bank does because it gets proof of the effectiveness of the MITRE courses. Even Woolcote Brown does, because he has an enjoyable time living in a genre he enjoys and may even learn some new life skills. Do you see?"

"I understand," said Dr Leona.

"Good. Now, I don't know about you," said Ann Thorpe, "but *I* am in dire need of some alcoholic therapy. Would you care to join us, Doctor?"

Better not push this, Leona thought. "No, you're all right, I've brought my own sandwiches. And really, I ought to be preparing Mr Brown for his trip."

He stood up, shook hands with Ann Thorpe – so warm! – and McDool – so silky! – and left the room.

"Where are we headed?" asked Thorpe. "Pasta la Vista?"

"Of course," McDool said. "Romeo has reserved your old place. Could be a bit of a squeeze, though – he's got one of his live acts in to attract some more punters."

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Pasta la Vista clunked to the sounds of plastic cutlery on steel plates and forced conversation.

Romeo smiled broadly as they arrived, and embraced Ann Thorpe warmly, nodding a greeting at McDool. "Ann! It is good to see you again! I was afraid you had abandoned me!"

"Romeo! I can't pop back here every lunch-time when I'm in Singapore or LA or Düsseldorf. But when I'm in this city I always look in on you, you know that!" She looked across the crowded restaurant. "Thank goodness you've reintroduced the concept of tables! That TV-dinner style you were pioneering last time really wasn't greatly to my, ah, taste."

"Hahaha!" Romeo bellowed, guiding the women towards the back of restaurant. "Taste, very good! No, the vogue for eating lunch-on-the-lap has passed. Pasta La Vista is now at the forefront of tradition, with conventional tables and chairs. Your table. You should have a fine view of my new discovery. He's an exciting new poet. I made sure that he wouldn't begin until you arrived."

A dishevelled figure loped towards the restaurant's small stage and announced, "This poem is called *Now Wash Your Hands*." Romeo clapped

enthusiastically and flaccid applause rippled across the restaurant floor. "Your menus, ladies. I'll be back to take your order in a few minutes."

"They said my poems were worse than doggerel!" the poet declaimed.

McDool looked at Ann Thorpe with genuine admiration. "Ann, you are quite simply the best. I used to dream of replacing you, but you're one of a kind. I mean, I couldn't help believing you myself."

The poet opened his eyes wide in pretend shock. "They said my poems could be written on bog-roll!" Some of the diners tittered nervously.

Thorpe smiled. "Thank you for the compliment, Jane. You did pretty well yourself. We all know that this particular chap isn't ideal management material, and at the end of the day all your doctor wanted was an explanation. Who cares if it's a truthful one?"

The poet lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "They said my poems used dull rhymes and rhythm!"

"One potential problem solved, Jane, but from what you were saying earlier you have your own concerns? Could you pass me the Wine Lust while we're waiting? Thanks."

The poet raised his chin. "I said: Hey, they cost a million." He bowed.

"It's my aromatherapy system, the GinSling Fan-Tastic? I like to have Neroli Renaissance running in the office while I'm working. Helps me concentrate. But yesterday morning I was all over the place, drowsy, unable to think straight." McDool closed her menu.

"That was the end, actually," said the poet. A few people clapped.

"So eventually I took a look at the Fan-Tastic and I found it had been tampered with."

"No!" Thorpe exclaimed.

"Afraid so. Somebody had replaced Neroli Renaissance with a Garden of Dreams cartridge. Perhaps they were hoping I would fall asleep at my desk or something. I suspect it might have been Scott. I don't have any proof of that, though."

"This one is called Free Market, " the poet declaimed. "The supermarkets, pumping out their lies with the smell of fresh-baked bread."

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Unhappy employees equals unsuccessful companies. If somebody is trying to get at you we need to get this sorted out quickly. Hmm... I'll give some thought to the best way – it will probably be better if it's perceived as coming from outside, to minimise potential personal resentment and animosity towards you. Ah, here comes Romeo again."

"The same old lies, the cries of murder in my head!" wailed the poet.

"Romeo, be a dear and get the man a cocktail. A Tequila Mockingbird or something. And ask him to reconsider his career path. His current one isn't working for me."

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Lying on the couch, Woolcote fought a sudden feeling of panic.

You've certainly screwed up big time, said his paranoia. Didn't you read somewhere about involuntary organ donations? This has got to be a set-up.

He began to wonder if all this was really such a good idea. To swap real life for unreality, even if it was only for a few days.

"Feeling a little nervous, are we?" said Dr Leona, checking the electronic monitors.

Woolcote nodded.

"Look at it this way. Every night you voluntarily give yourself up to the world of dreams – and many people actually feel cheated when they wake up and don't know what they dreamt about. Shortly, you will willingly surrender yourself to ImaginAction's world of dreams. The only difference between our dreams and your own is that you are guaranteed to

remember ours. And as I told you in my lecture, remembering is the key to learning. Head up please."

He attached chains of tiny metallic cacti over Woolcote's skull and adjusted them until they fit snugly.

"Head back down. All okay, not hurting?"

Woolcote nodded again. The spikes flexed as he moved.

"Good," Dr Leona said. "Don't worry. We shall be watching you and monitoring your physical well-being at all times. In a short time we'll hook you up to the ImaginAction computer and you'll surface as a Storynaut in the Cyberpunk VirtuWorld, safe as houses."

There was no going back. There had never been any going back, not from the moment he'd been summoned to Vanch's office.

Woolcote waited. His head was getting heavy. He struggled bravely to stay alert, even though he knew it was pointless. His legs were gone. Lower than his head, something else was doing his breathing for him. Or was it still his lungs?...

Don't leave me, said his paranoia.

I can't help it, Woolcote whispered in his mind. He wondered what time it was, wondered if he could get to his mobile phone to find out. He tried to move, get himself more comfortable.

You know we were always meant to be together. Don't fret, I'll find you somehow.

Now he could only move his eyes. His eyelids masked them.

Later, deep inside his pupa of unconnected thoughts, he felt the sharp pain of raindrops racing through his scalp.

He was in the safest hands in the world.

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In his office, Charles Atton drummed his fingers to accompany the Tirolean drinking song which his computer was playing in a vain attempt to raise his spirits.

"I'm tired of this," he said to the goldfish on his screen. It returned his gaze with wary rendered eyes and swam through the arch of its painted castle.

Business had been less than good since the debacle at the conference. In fact it had been less than existent. He typed up his various business problems on a presentation slide to crystallise his thoughts.

10 Days To Ruin

- Contracts evaporated – no work in pipeline
- Old friends always "busy" whenever I call
- Book deal cancelled
- Publishers moving out of management and personal development to concentrate on home & garden makeover market
- Agent not confident a new company will take it on – message apparently too negative for today's management culture
- E-mail continually playing up
- Phone hasn't rung for days

Atton slumped back in his Ergonomic Swedish Manager's chair and eyed his telephone.

"Ring, damn you!" he shouted in a burst of rage.

The phone obediently tweeted. Atton excitedly scrambled for the receiver. "Hello?" he said.

"Mister Atton?" It was an unfamiliar female voice.

"Yes," he said, regaining his composure. "Atton, Strategist. How can I help you?" He started his PC's job-costing clock, thinking *Time is Money*. Detecting this, the computer smoothly mutated the drinking song into something vaguely Mozarty.

“My name is Sheila. Mr Atton, if you could have all the windows and doors in your home replaced with quality replacements totally free of charge how many would you have done don’t worry Mr Atton I’m not trying to sell you anything I’m just carrying out a survey for Carters the quality double-glazing company our representatives are in your area this evening and will visit you for a no-obligation appointment what time would it be convenient Mr Atton.”

He nearly dropped the phone. His number had always been on a blocking list for sales calls. “I’m sorry, I think you must have the wrong person. Goodbye.”

It was so unfair. He added a new point to his slide.

- More harassment courtesy of Wislon or Reynard or whatever he’s calling himself this week

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During the comforting days of the Cold War, scientists would sometimes speculate that only the ants and cockroaches would survive the coming nuclear Armageddon. By early afternoon Charles Atton had decided that when the insects’ descendants developed telecommunications, the first call taken by Antexander Graham Bell would be from a double glazing firm that was somehow still in business and offering a Great Special Deal on windows and doors for that month only.

He had fielded nineteen calls from the telesales agencies employed by Carter’s, KleerGlaze and Diamond, and he was running out of the smart answers showcased in his once-popular after-dinner speech, *When I’m Calling You*. He had already done his favourites twice (“Quentin Tarantino Script-Writing Conference” and “Your Call Was Foretold In Biblical Prophecy”).

The telephone bleated again. Noticing that the handset was still warm from the last call, Atton resolved to make this one quick.

"Hello Mr Atton? This is Trace from Kleerglaze. We're offering a specially reduced discount on all our windows and doors this month."

"Banana," said Atton in a fruity tone.

"What did you say?"

"Banana," Atton said again.

Trace from Kleerglaze hung up. Atton had never been able to work out why salespeople found the word "Banana" so off-putting, but he had discovered it was the fastest way to get rid of unwanted calls.

"What action should I take?" he said to the Bonsai tree on his desk. "Should I have the phone number changed? But that would show them they're getting to me. And there would be the expense of reprinting the stationery."

The Bonsai tree stood inert in its pot and dreamed of sunlight and fresh breezes.

"Maybe you're right."

The tree noticed images of playing-cards reflected in the lenses of Atton's glasses. His computer was treating him to a game of poker. As usual, it was beating him.

Atton's phone trilled. "Don't you dare look at my cards while I'm away," he told his computer. Affronted, it waited until he had picked up the phone and then started playing the Tirolean drinking-song again, with extra oompahs.

"Atton, Strategist," he said wearily.

"Mr Atton?" It was a voice he thought he recognised from somewhere.

Bloody hell, am I going to speak to every single telesales operative in the world today? he thought. "Banana," he said, keen to get back to his card-game.

"What was that?" said the woman. "I can't hear you. There's some loud music in the background drowning out your voice."

Atton leaned over to the speaker cable and tugged it roughly out of the back of his computer. "That should be better. Can you hear me now? I said 'Banana'. I said it because I am not interested in taking calls from talentless, ill-educated losers whose one aim in what they laughingly call their 'life' is to sell me double glazing which I don't need because I live in a little hole in the ground. In the graveyard," he added, improvising. "I only get up at night, you see, and if I had windows I would have the chore of drawing the curtains all the time. Goodbye."

"Don't put the phone down, Mr Atton. My name is Ann Thorpe. President of the GinSling Corporation."

That's a good one. "I don't think so. I hardly believe that someone of Ann Thorpe's stature would phone me herself. Wouldn't you imagine that she'd have a PA and secretary to do that for her?"

"I like to be hands-on when it counts. I'm not in my office at the moment and I need to talk to you urgently about some work. And in case you're not convinced it's really me, we talked a little at that charity fundraiser eight or nine months back, and you told me a funny tale about the day you had to make mint sauce using a peppermint tea-bag, remember, Charles?"

Atton recalled one or two glasses of champagne too many and Ann Thorpe's eyes glazing over as he had regaled her with his hilarious anecdote. *It is her, he realised. She even pronounced my name correctly. That means I just called one of this country's most successful business leaders a loser.* He blabbed away at the phone. "Haven't you heard, Ann? I'm a pariah. Nobody will employ me until I decide to be a good little boy. Probably not even then at this rate."

Ann Thorpe heard the bitterness in his voice. "Charles, not everybody cares about the blacklist. I need something looking into. If you're interested in coming out in the day-time, that is."

"When you rang, I thought you were someone else," he said feebly.

"Nobody ever mistakes me for someone else, Charles. Likewise, you have a reputation as an independent free-thinker, and your approach is what I need now. Do you have any windows in your schedule for tomorrow?" She checked herself. "If not a window, then perhaps a space in your diary?"

"Very funny." Atton paused, pretending to consult his computer's day-planner. He took several seconds negotiating himself through all the toys and games he had installed on it to keep himself entertained. "I can, er, let me see. Er, two, no, three-thirty?"

"Suits me. Your offices?" said Thorpe.

"Yuh. See you then." He put the receiver down.

"There we are," he said aloud to himself. "Call some people a loser and they still come back begging for attention. I've still got it."

Atton's phone rang.

"Atton, Strategist."

"Beeg Issue, please."

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"What an extraordinary character," Ann Thorpe later dictated to her GinSling AutoSecretary. "Although I had been told that nobody would touch him with a barge-pole at the moment, I have to say that getting through to his office was very difficult. The phone was constantly engaged, showing he's still a big success in his field. Pity my e-mails to him kept getting bounced back. When we did speak, I managed to get through a whole conversation with him without hearing one of his amusing stories, thank goodness." She shook her head. "It's a shame it has to be ImaginAction at this particular time, but I need him where I can keep an eye on him. And he can't do too much damage."

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It was the silence he noticed first. Not the blessed quiet that would follow the bump and hump of his music-loving next door neighbours in the early hours, but a total absence of sound.

Then there was a feeling of dizziness, of falling from a great height, of rolling over and over and over, until he hit something hard.

Woolcote opened his eyes. He was lying on the roots of a gnarled tree at the base of a steep grassy slope. The silence was punctuated by a burst of birdsong overhead.

He took a deep breath and smelt the earth beneath him.

This is odd, he thought. *What am I doing here? And where is here?* An image seeped slowly into his mind... *a man talking to me in a room...* A jumble of confused images swamped the memory, forcing it out of focus.

Woolcote painfully got to his feet and smoothed some moss and flakes of bark off his clothes. *My clothes*. He gave a sigh of delight at the sight of the body-hugging red leatherette Cybersuit with gold decals and matching soft boots. *This suits me*, he thought. *I definitely should be wearing this. Hold on, is that a bruise caused by the tree?* He patted a bulge on his arm and found it was a pocket containing his mobile. He looked at the screen and saw the time was 15:31. Pleased to have found something familiar, he decided to climb up the slope in the hope that he would get a better view of his surroundings.

At the top Woolcote stepped onto a muddy path track worn into the grass. In one direction he could see the path winding up into the hillside, while in the other it snaked muddily down towards a ramshackle cluster of buildings in the distance. There was thick forest on either side of the path which he thought looked rather unfriendly. Anyway, if there were buildings he might find some people to help him out.

He had been walking for what felt like a long time when he caught the sound of hoofbeats approaching. Rounding a bend in the path a few hundred yards ahead came a horse and rider clad in mediaeval dress.

Bells jingled on the horse's bridle and the hilt of a sword was clearly visible over the rider's right shoulder.

Perhaps he's on his way to a fancy-dress party, Woolcote thought.

As soon as the rider saw Woolcote, he spurred his horse towards him. Woolcote prepared to throw himself out of the way, thinking that he was about to become the victim of a bit-and-run accident, but the rider pulled his horse up sharply in front of him at the last moment.

"What art thou, stranger, and from whence come ye, garbed in such strange apparel?" the horseman demanded. The horse snorted derisively to back him up.

"I could say the same about you," Woolcote answered, regretting his tone as the rider unsheathed his sword and levelled it at Woolcote's throat in a single swift movement.

"Identify thyself, cur, lest I strike thee down as the demon's spawn thou appearest to be!" the rider shouted, bringing the point of the sword perilously close to Woolcote's eyes.

Woolcote winced. "Actually, I'm a stranger in these parts. Do you, er, suppose you could tell me where I am?" he asked desperately.

"This is the land of Gardon," the rider answered sternly. "I am Baron Braggut and all those who enter my Barony without just cause do so at the peril of their very lives."

"Well, that makes about as much sense as anything that's happened to me so far, I suppose," said Woolcote. "Which of the Bank's services would you like to discuss?"

"Do not think that I will fall for thy knavish tricks, fool! Why do you not show me respect?"

"I'm sorry, I have absolutely no idea why I said that," Woolcote agreed. "As an organisation we pride ourselves on providing the highest levels of customer service and we treat all individuals with respect. Um." He covered his mouth with his right hand for a moment. "So, this Gardon, then, is it near London or somewhere?"

"That place is not in my Barony, boy. You do nothing to conceal the fact you are a stranger, an enemy and a spy! On your knees, miscreant dog!"

Woolcote hurriedly dropped to his knees, grimacing as the mud soaked through the pads of his Cybersuit. "I beg pardon, uh, your lordship," he said.

"Obviously, immediate execution is the necessary punishment for wretches such as thee," said the Baron.

"Obviously," Woolcote agreed with a few vigorous nods of his head. "Wait a minute, what did you say?"

The Baron gave an exasperated sigh, threw his sword onto the ground and dismounted from his horse. "My hounds show more manners than thee! Thou art to be executed for disrespect to the Baron's person!"

"But when's my trial?" Woolcote said hopefully.

"Trial?" the Baron repeated as if it was a word he had heard occasionally but had never needed to use. He picked his sword up. "Oh, no trial is needed."

Woolcote quickly got to his feet. "Then when's my execution?"

"This instant, of course. Is not justice delayed justice denied, serf? I prithee, kneel again: 'tis easier for me to get a clean cut at thy neck, and three or four hacks should see it done."

I don't think he's joking, Woolcote thought in panic. He looked at the Baron, then at the horse which had silently hobbled behind him to block escape back the way he had come. The deep ditches on each side of the track might be worth a try. Woolcote made a sudden lurch towards the edge of the track, but the Baron had anticipated his move and was there before him. Pushing Woolcote roughly to the ground with his foot, he hefted his sword in both hands and brought it up high above his head.

"This has gone far enough, I'm going to phone the police," Woolcote exclaimed. He started to press the buttons on his mobile and then threw up his hands in despair. "Typical! There's never a signal when you want one!" The mud squished under his knees, soaking through to his skin.

"So, you plan to stab me with thy dagger, boy? Thou hast spirit, I'll grant that, but thou cannot hope to hurt me with a toy such as that."

"No, no, no, it's not a dagger!" cried Woolcote, keen not to make a hopeless situation any worse. "It's a, uh, well, you clearly have a keen eye for fine workmanship, you can see what it is," Woolcote said. "Most people would assume it was just a cheap trinket. Take a look." He held the mobile out to the knight, who frustratingly kept hold of his sword with one hand.

"The edges are so smooth!" the Baron marvelled. "The joins, so intricate and exact." He turned the phone over and then back again. "What is the meaning of the pattern?"

"GinSling, that's the name of the maker. The, uh, craftsman. And 15:31, that's the time." *That's odd. It can't still be half past three.*

"Time? If thou sayest so. Ah well, back on thy knees, wretch."

A thought occurred to Woolcote. "Don't you want to know about the genie?"

"Thou speakest nonsense, boy. What is a genie?"

"It's, um, a spirit. They usually live in lamps."

"Vermin, thinkest thou that I have all day to waste dealing in story-books with thee? Spirits in lamps? Not here in Gardon. Prepare to die!"

"Just press the big button if you don't believe me!" wailed Woolcote.

"What, and have thee poison me with a hidden blade? Do it thyself."

Woolcote took the phone from him. "Listen. The genie will sing to you."

He pressed the ringtone selection button. The phone began to bleep its rendition of *The Ride of The Valkyries*, which GinSling's marketing department had identified as "the perfect alarm call" and safely out of copyright. Woolcote began to sing along, desperately trying to postpone his imminent death. "Duh-duh-du-du-duh-duh, duh-du-du-duh-duh, duh-du-du-duh-duh, duh-du-du-duuuuh!"

The Baron looked at him with incredulity. "Thy lord is not moved." The horse whinnied, unsettled.

Woolcote smiled in desperation. "Give it another go." He pressed the button again. The horse paced and shuffled. "Duh-duh-du-du-duh," Woolcote sang again, out of tune. "The genie likes it if I sing to him," he told the knight. "He'll be out soon."

"My horse is of the opposite opinion," said the knight. He moved over to frightened creature. "Quiet, Starblaze! No need to fear."

"Duh-duh-du-du-duh!" screeched Woolcote. The horse suddenly reared up on its hind legs. The knight jerked away from it and slipped over in the mud, dropping his sword. Woolcote made a dive for it, but he was sent sprawling by a vicious kick from the knight.

"Come any closer and I'll have thee flayed alive," hissed the knight.

"I'm getting the impression you don't really like me," said Woolcote. The horse whinnied fearfully behind him. He rolled away from the knight and again pressed the button on the mobile clenched in his hand. The skittish horse shook its head from side to side and bolted down the track away from the noise. Now on his feet, the knight took two steps backwards as his horse sped past. "Wuah!" he shouted. There was a squelching thud.

The Ringtone of The Valkyries over, Woolcote lifted his head from the mud and looked for his would-be executioner. The Baron was nowhere to be seen. Woolcote stood up stiffly and looked at his filthy Cybersuit. *Typical. First day I get to wear it, and it's already ruined.* He tucked his mobile back in its pocket and slowly approached the edge of the track. Looking down, he could see the Baron lying motionless amid the ferns at the bottom of the ditch.

Knocked out! Serves him right. With his horse gone, he'll be on foot when he wakes up. There's no way he'll catch me.

Woolcote pulled the knight's sword out of the mud for protection and again set out for the buildings.

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Manacled to a wall, Woolcote shuffled his feet to keep his circulation going and reflected that he had had better days...