

Every so often, you come across a job that seems too good to be true. The salary, working hours, the benefits package and opportunities for progression all seem to be a little too generous and as you sign the contract you can't help feeling suspicious. You're right to be wary. If something seems too good to be true, more often than not it is.

There's always a price to be paid somewhere. The only dream job that exists is the one that becomes a nightmare. That's what I found out when I started this job. Nightmare is an understatement. And the price...well, let's just say that the price is one I will be paying until my dying day. Perhaps even beyond that.

It wasn't an advert in any local rag or on some recruitment agency's website. I wasn't even looking for another job. I'd just been made redundant and was considering my options, ticking away on some agency work, when a letter arrived from my former boss. It contained a written reference and a printout of an online job that he thought I should consider applying for.

*Hope you're doing ok, Mark. Again, I'm sorry about the firm's decision to let you go. Believe me, I fought tooth and nail to keep you instated but this bloody company's run by accountants now and the bean counters won. I know you're considering your options – you told me you might even go travelling when the redundancy money comes through and I don't blame you. However, someone in the trade passed this vacancy to me and I thought you might be interested. You've got the experience and I think they'd be very interested in you. It won't even mean relocating. This firm's on your doorstep,*

*just down the road. I must be honest, I don't know too much about them, they're either a new set-up or a small concern. But people in the know have good words to say about them. Some real prospects for advancement and promotion. Have a look anyway, see what you think. Stay in touch. Best regards.*

I'd thought of travelling. I'm thirty in three months time, and it's something I never got round to doing. Now the divorce had come through, and Jackie had kindly taken the house and showed me the way to bedsit land, I had no real commitments or any reason to stay in the area. But the redundancy payout was not going to be huge and the divorce lawyers had left me high and dry. Better to find some work, any work and wipe out the debts before starting over. This job looked interesting. Certainly better than the pallet dragging I was doing for the agency at the Tesco Distribution Centre in Didcot, anyway.

The vacancy was for a Storage Supervisor within an archive storage company. Funny timing - my last job had been with an archive storage firm, but not at senior level. Still, they wouldn't know that. When I applied I lied slightly on the CV, telling them that I was a bit more than an acting supervisor at the previous place. I didn't think I'd have a cat in hell's chance of getting it anyway, but figured it was worth a shot. Had nothing to lose, anyway.

The salary was "commensurate with experience". Open to negotiation, then. Just had to make sure I didn't put down the real salary from my last job on the application. 33 days annual leave PA (but that would include bank holidays), generous non-contributory pension scheme, profit share,

subsidised canteen, childcare vouchers, BUPA membership...for a warehouse job, the benefits were pretty good.

But everything looks good on paper. It would be at the interview that I'd have a better idea of what they were offering, and what they'd expect in turn. Then I could ask them about the strange footnote at the end of the advert, which read: "Adasantsat Storage is committed to personal advancement, a healthy work/life balance and a job for life". A rare thing in these times. A job for life? Who advertises that these days?

Three days after applying I received a letter inviting me to attend an interview. Two senior managers, Mr Graham O'Neil and Mr Oliver Nigel, would be conducting the interview along with the Personnel Manager, Edith Olgin.

Adasantsat Storage was easy enough to find. It's on one of the smaller industrial estates on the outskirts of town sharing space with a builders' merchants, a frozen fish delivery firm, and a furniture restoration company. The warehouse was modern, obviously recently built. A corrugated metal skin painted in white encased a unit that I estimated to be about fifteen metres high. Driving alongside it to the car park at the rear I could see that it extended to about fifty metres.

The reception was spacious, furnished with comfy waiting sofas and a well presented and absolutely drop dead gorgeous blonde secretary. There were welcoming handshakes and smiles from the two managers who came down the stairs to take me to the interview.

Graham O’Neil was small and slight, with a pale complexion, reddish hair and bright eyes. He was the younger of the two, looked to be in his mid thirties. Oliver Nigel was taller and older, with a neatly trimmed beard that was as black as his thinning hair. Both wore nondescript grey suits, and identical striped ties. Perhaps they belonged to the same cricket team or bowling club, I thought at the time. Dull, corporate suity types, but quite friendly and enthusiastic with it.

O’Neil apologised to me for the absence of Edith Olgin. In a broad Northern Irish accent he informed me that she sent her apologies, couldn’t be here because she was preparing a disciplinary hearing against one of the stores team.

“Very rare occurrence, nothing to be concerned about,” O’Neil smiled reassuringly. “But she’ll spend more time with you – sorry, with the successful candidate – during the induction.”

Ah. He’d given himself away, there. And as the meeting progressed, I felt quite optimistic.

It was one of those interviews where you know the job’s in the bag. They asked me a few questions relating to the CV, mainly previous experience and qualifications. They seemed to be really happy with the fact that I had a scissor lift licence.

“You won’t believe how hard it is trying to find someone with a MEWP ticket”, the older manager said. His accent was cut glass English, a sharp contrast to O’Neil’s Belfast brogue. O’Neil being such an obviously Irish name, and Nigel Oliver sounded so fundamentally English, it seemed strange that their accents – and indeed, their appearance - matched the expectation that

their names gave. Made me wonder what this Olgin bird looked like. With a name like that my mind conjured up a picture of a heavy-set, aging Eastern European hag, like the poisoned broly wielding Rosa Klebb from the old Bond film.

“Not a major problem if you didn’t of course, we’d have been happy to put the successful candidate through a course. But this makes our lives a lot easier.”

I’d obviously just jumped straight to the top of the list.

The rest of the interview passed quickly. They told me about the benefits, the salary structure and what my duties would be. Then it was my turn to ask questions.

“Adasantsat is a strange name for a company. Is that an acronym?”

The two managers looked at each other. Just for a brief moment I thought I saw the smile freeze on the face of the younger man.

O’Neil took control. “It’s actually a composite, made up of the initials of the founding members.” He gave me the names, strange foreign sounding monikers that I forgot the moment he revealed them. Ah well, I thought at the time. I’d worked for companies with stranger names than that.

“A job for life,” I continued. I gave a cheeky grin. “That’s a big claim. Is it guaranteed in writing?”

They both laughed.

“One of the benefits of working for Adasantsat,” O’Neil answered. “In these turbulent economic times, it is one of the major selling points of our company. And it’s no idle boast. Our staff turnover rate is practically zero. We really do emphasise our commitment to keeping our staff happy and well

motivated. And yes, it is a condition of your contract of employment that after your probationary period – and barring any serious breaches of discipline – you are guaranteed lifetime employment within Adasantsat.”

I looked sceptical. “What about branch closures, downturns? If you lose any major clients, doesn’t have an effect on your business? In that case, do you offer relocation to other branches?”

Nigel shook his head. “Firstly, we only have the one client. And that contract is one we have had since the company started. We will never lose it. Our business is secure.” He gestured to the viewing window behind him that opened up onto the warehouse. “And this is our only UK branch. Well, we have one in London but we’ve outgrown that. We are in the process of taking the data from that site and reshelving it here. London will be empty by the end of the third quarter.

“We have branches worldwide, of course, and there are opportunities to transfer if you so desire, but generally we prefer to keep all our team members in the same branch.”

I raised my eyebrows. A worldwide operation, a branch in every country – and yet only one client. One they were convinced they’d never lose. “This client must be a big concern, then. What industry are they in?”

“The client has many areas of operation. Fingers in all sorts of pies, you might say. His business interests are of no concern to us. All we have to concern ourselves with is the safe storage of his data. It’s mainly commercial data, contracts, tenders, receipts and so forth. Lately we’ve been asked to provide digital storage solutions, but that’s only a small element of our business. Our client still prefers the traditional methods of paper contracts.”

His tone changed, became serious, the cut-glass accent now razor sharp. “One of the most important conditions of our contract with the client is confidentiality. The records are not to be disclosed to anyone. The boxes are sealed and tamper proof. Any attempt to open the boxes or inspect the contents is a gross breach of discipline, and is dealt with accordingly. As Storage Supervisor, it would be one of your duties to ensure that this procedure is rigidly enforced and to undertake the necessary corrective action if the policy is breached.”

I nodded. Fair enough. The last firm I worked for had had the same approach. Who’d want to risk their job to look at some musty old paperwork, anyway? Didn’t like that ‘necessary corrective action’ touch though. Guess that’s what Olgin was involving herself with.

The older man beckoned me over. I stood beside him, staring through the viewing window. We were in the office on the top floor, so this vantage point gave an impressive view of the warehouse, completely racked out with narrow aisle racking.

“This area is significantly more cost-effective than London, and the height of the warehouse facility here means we can utilise higher racking. Each column within the racking contains ten bays, and of course we need access to them via the use of scissor lifts. We take in a shipment of historical data from the London site once a month. It takes our storemen about two days to book it in and put it away, and after that the majority of the time is spent on data retrieval. As we explained earlier, the client will request anything between one to thirty boxes per day, which we will then deliver to a location of his choosing. It could be ordered at any time, which is why we run

twenty four-seven. The majority of the stores team are on fixed day shifts, but we do insist on all senior team members to participate in a call-out system, which is decided by rota.

“So the order could come in at any time, and if you’re on the rota it would be up to you to come into the warehouse, pick the box, despatch it and deliver it. Of course, we make it worth your while. We pay a very agreeable shift premium, and if the call takes too much of your time, particularly at night, the firm will give you the next day off without affecting your annual leave entitlement. This week the Managing Director, Peter Tyndall, is on call.”

O’Neil smiled knowingly. “He’s already been out three times this week., but company man that he is he hasn’t taken a day off yet.”

Nigel shrugged. “It’s the luck of the draw. Some weeks you’ll be dead and not called out once, other times...well, it all depends on the client’s requirements. The other thing you need to be aware of is that the drop-off point could be anywhere within the UK.”

I turned around in surprise. “Not one central drop-off point, then? And you don’t use couriers?”

Oliver shook his head gravely. “A condition of the contract. No third parties to be utilised whatsoever. All data is to be handled strictly by Adasantsat employees only.”

I whistled. “You must clock up a fair few miles. What’s the furthest afield you’ve ever gone?”

“Scotland is the furthest. That reminds me – although the box totals are between one and fifty, on extreme occasions it could be any number. For example, about twenty years ago we took over one hundred and sixty boxes



to Scotland. That was when Piper Alpha went up in flames. The documents were connected with the incident, and they were required in Aberdeen urgently.”

I nodded thoughtfully. Obviously documents the lawyers needed. The minute there’s a casualty and the threat of liability there’s a company solicitor looking for a loophole to get his firm off the hook. That’s when they need the paperwork urgently.

“The advert mentioned the escalation of a major contract. What’s that all about?”

O’Neil scratched his beard. “To be honest with you, Mark, that’s a bit of a sore point at the moment. The client has informed us that there will be a major escalation in the storage and retrieval of his data in the near future, but he hasn’t given us much to go on. ‘You’ll know when I know’ is the response we get whenever we try to raise it with him. However, we were advised to get some new storemen on board soon to be able to cope with it. We have a couple starting today. All we need now is a new Storage Supervisor.

“Are we able to approach your former employers for a reference?”

“Not a problem,” I replied. “They said they were sorry to see me go, but with the economic downturn...” I shrugged my shoulders. “I wasn’t on my own.”

Both of the interviewers nodded sympathetically. O’Neil lowered my CV onto the desk and looked up.

“And what salary were you on at the last company?”

I made up a figure off the top of my head. Not too much, didn’t want to take the piss.

They both looked at each other, their expressions giving nothing away. Shit, had I priced myself too high?

“We have a few more candidates to see today. But we’ll be in touch.”

They didn’t hang around. Two days later I received a formal job offer, with a higher salary than I had quoted. My luck was changing after all. When I picked myself up from the ceiling, I sat down to sign the necessary forms. I cleared a space on the bedside table and picked up a pen. I scrawled my signature, printed the name on the line and put the date on. That was when the picture fell on me.

A faded 10”x12” framed print of a Spanish sunset, not my choice of decoration; it had come with the bedsit from the previous tenant. I’d always meant to take the ugly thing down, but had never got round to it. No need to worry about that now, I thought, wincing at the pain in my shoulder. The bottom edge of the frame had caught the top of my shoulder blade before falling on the edge of the table and smashing.

I threw the picture frame onto the bed and carefully scooped up the glass shards. I wrapped them in the C4 envelope that the contract and job offer had arrived in and pushed the bundle to the top edge of the table.

Ouch. One of the glass shards had forced its way through the manila envelope and pressed into the side of my thumb. Blood welled from the cut immediately and ran down my palm. I lifted it and held it to my mouth, sucking most of the blood from the wound before spitting it into a tissue. I grimaced at the salty, metallic taste and groaned when I saw that some had dripped onto the job offer. I hastily wiped it away with the tissue.

Well, I'd managed to get most of it off, but there was a faint smear just above my signature. I sighed heavily. That wouldn't make a good impression, would it? Still holding the tissue against the wound, I rummaged through the paperwork on the cabinet, found the second copy (the one to be kept for my records) and placed that one in the SAE instead. I picked up the bloodstained copy and filed it in the black expanding file I kept near the bed.

The start date was effective almost immediately. The second of November – three days after my interview. Parking my Toyota in the staff car park, I reflected that now I would see just how good - or bad – the job really was. It's usually in the meeting of your co-workers that you suss out the new company straight away. Very rare that they're as smiley-faced and optimistic as the management that interview you!

Paul Maskell met me at reception. A stocky guy in his mid thirties with dark cropped hair, his smile was genuine enough and his handshake welcoming. His jollity seemed a little forced though.

This was the current supervisor, who would be moving up to management within the next few months, and who's role I would be taking over.

"How long've you been here?" I asked over coffee in the staff canteen. It was empty apart from two smiling catering workers, their overalls almost too clean and white for their job. They bustled past, clearing away the breakfast dishes. The lingering smell in the air was appetising, an aroma of quality dry cure back bacon, not the normal catering rubbish. It made me wish I'd come

in earlier and taken advantage of the £1.99 big breakfast. Still, there was plenty of time for that in the future.

“Four years.” Paul winked at one of the catering staff as she wiped the table. “Started off as a storeman, bumped up to supervisor within nine months...”

“And now set to become a suit,” I chuckled. “The lads ok about you selling out?”

Paul raised his palms and grinned. “A few comments about being a class traitor, yeah. Gotta be honest, though, I’m looking forward to it. That’s one of the good things about this firm, there’s no ‘them and us’ like you get in a lot o’ places. Everyone mucks in; we’re all on the same side. And that’s no corporate bollocks – when Piper Alpha went up and most of our storesmen were in Aberdeen, all the management slogged their guts out in the warehouse, putting the boxes away. OK, I know that was a while back, but hey - not many places where you’ll see the MD in a scissor lift, putting data to shelf.”

Or coming out in the middle of the night to pull a box and hand deliver it. I told myself that was a good thing, the MD leading by example, but something was nagging. It didn’t seem right. And Paul Maskell seemed a bit too anxious to push the ‘we’re all one big happy family’ theme. Let’s see now, I thought. What to ask him...

“You been called out much after hours?”

Paul drained his coffee. “Quite a few. Condition of the contract. After the probationary, everyone is on the call-out rota, but they make it worth your while.”

“Client’s request,” I muttered, thinking hard. “Surely, a box can’t be that urgent? What’s in those boxes?”

“Just data. Don’t know what type.”

“You never asked?”

“Why should I?” His tone was slightly defensive.

I sat back in the chair. “Curiosity. Surely, if you’re called out in the middle of the night to deliver a box you’d want to know why it’s so damn urgent.”

He smiled, a little too quickly. A nervous grin. “I used to. After a while it’s just not important. You’ll find that as well.”

I wasn’t convinced, but I decided not to push the issue. Guess I’d find out myself eventually.

Paul gave me the full tour, starting with the important places – the canteen, restroom and toilets – then the mandatory Fire Exits and evacuation assembly points.

“The offices you’ve already seen,” he said as he handed me a hi-vis. “O’Neil and Nigel aren’t here today – in fact, you’ll hardly see them. They’re usually out liasing with the client and trying to get some new work in. As if we haven’t got enough to do... Now, the place where the real work is done.”

From the observation window in the management office the warehouse looked big. At ground level it was huge.

The narrow aisle racking stretched to approximately nine metres in height. In the middle aisle I could see a Genie GS-2632 scissor lift extended to its full height of 7.9 metres, its operator busily scanning in the barcodes on the data boxes he’d just put to an empty shelf with a handheld scanning

machine. Another one was at the far end, it's operator loading it with larger size archive storage boxes

The operator at the far end did a quick count on the number of boxes in his machine, realised he'd put too many in, and started pulling some out, placing them carefully on the pallet as he did so. I could see that these guys were working within tolerance. The last thing you want to do is put too much weight in one of these machines. I nodded in approval.

Paul caught my eye. "Health and Safety conscious, are we? No need to worry. We're well looked after, not had an accident in over six years. Not even a paper cut. I tell you, mate, you couldn't be safer if you were wrapped up in cotton wool!"

Again, too forced. This didn't ring true. Again, I said nothing.

"Well, you can see they're busy. I'll introduce you to 'em later."

We moved to the small office situated at the left side of the main roller shutter doors. Inside was a pair of desks with a PC and monitor on each.

"Grab a pew, mate," Paul pointed to a swivel chair as he sat down to the PC underneath the Pirelli calendar. Miss November's tits looked very inviting.

"Gotta show you the database." He tapped in his username and password. "This is a piece of piss to use. Some of our stores guys aren't the sharpest tools in the set, and even they were up and running on it within an hour. Here we go."

A yellow and black screen flashed up.

“You can see this is web-based. The idea is that the client can log into it as well, any time, any place in the world. Keeps a track on his data, can work out where it is, where it was...”

“And where it isn’t. Do you get many boxes going astray?”

Paul scratched his chin. “Never happens. Training and rigid procedure sees to that.”

“But human error, surely? When you get a returned box that is put back in an incorrect location? With the best procedures in the world, anyone can make a mistake.”

Paul turned from the screen and stared at me, a strange expression on his face. “Mistakes are not made here,” he said in a defensive, slightly angry tone. “Not since...well, that was a long time ago. All in the past. Nothing for you to worry about.”

“Well, I’m not worried but now I *am* curious. Spill the beans, Paul.”

“You don’t. Need. To. Know.” A harsher tone, his face turning red. As if in anger. Or...fear?

“For fuck’s sake, man! If I’m going to be running this place I *do* need to know. Why the secrecy?”

I could see that I was going to make myself unpopular. I like asking questions, and I don’t like being fobbed off or kept in the dark. I press for answers if they’re not forthcoming, regardless of what rank I have in the company or who’s managerial toes I’m treading on. Guess that’s one of the unofficial reasons I was “selected” for redundancy in my last job.

Paul opened his mouth to speak, but the phone got there first. Saved by the bell, I thought.

“Hello, warehouse. Oh, hello Pete. Right, right...oh yeah, I see it, it’s on the screen now.”

On the screen a message flashed:

**ONE ORDER FOR DESPATCH. STATUS: PRIORITY.**

Paul moved the mouse cursor over it and clicked once. The screen changed to a different layout. Leaning forward I could see a few tables of information – barcode of item required, shelf location, due date, and delivery address.

“Wantage Road, Harwell. Well, don’t get more local than that! No probs, Pete, we’ll get that out now for him. Cheers, mate.” He replaced the phone and turned to me.

“Well, best way to learn.” Another click of the mouse button and the laser printer whirred into life behind me.

Grabbing the printed screenshot he moved out into the warehouse.

“Phil!” he bellowed. “Urgent order!”

Phil Ross was young, early twenties, with a sullen expression. The only time he opened his mouth to give what passed as a “welcome to Adasantsat” smile I saw one of his front teeth was heavily discoloured. He held open the access gate of the scissor-lift for me, frowning at the printed screenshot.

“Fuckin’ hell,” he muttered. “Thought we’d picked this one last week. Right, hands within the guide rails at all times, scream if you wanna go faster.”

Pushing the joystick forward the machine hummed into life and sped down the narrow aisle. The full shelves scrolled by, mostly large size archive storage boxes stacked three high, two deep and six across in each bay. Each



facing side displayed a distinctive label with the firm's name on the top and the barcode at the bottom. Below the label was an older, handwritten one. Phil moved the machine too quickly down the aisle for me to examine them closely, and at ground level the orange hued light from the high pressure sodium lamps wasn't strong enough to see them properly. Dust gently shifted from the tops of the boxes as we passed.

“Here we go. Aisle six, column twelve, bay nine. Right at the top. Not scared of heights, are we?” Pressing the horizontal movement button he pushed the joystick forward again. This time the basket of the machine began to ascend.

As we moved upward, the sodium light grew stronger and I could see the older labels on some of the boxes more clearly. We ascended too quickly for me to focus on a particular label, but the impression I got was that whoever had written on them must've used some kind of code. It was all handwritten, in either black or red marker pen. There were dates, some recent, others going back years, the latter ones peeling away and almost falling away from the boxes. There were some strange drawings as well, like whoever had been labelling up the boxes had got bored and started doodling. Not your normal squiggles, though; these reminded me of the old astrological symbols, signs of the zodiac. Similar, but distinctly different – and also, strangely familiar.

And on the top of each label, a name.

In spite of the heat from the 250w lamps, now close to our heads as we neared the topmost shelf, I shivered.

The box ordered was a standard Fellows 725 R-kive storage box. Phil dragged it from the shelf, grunted at the returns label on it.

“Yeah, remember this one now. Client ordered it last week. Christ, that’s heavy. God knows what he added to it.

“Let’s ask Paul who’s got the honour of taking it.”

Both of us had the honour. Paul looked reluctant to send me out, but he’d had his orders from the Man Upstairs.

“You’re doubly honoured, mate,” he said to me as he put the phone down. “We don’t normally send new guys out until they’ve been here a while, learnt the ropes, and...well, it’s unusual.”

He was clearly uncomfortable with this. What could go wrong? Phil would be driving until the HR department had all my licence details, so they were covered there.

“Don’t worry about it. Phil will do all the necessary. Just...watch and learn.”

Phil handed me the despatch note as he got behind the wheel of the Transit.

Standard delivery note, with the date, order number, item number and delivery location. A box at the bottom for the recipient to sign and print as confirmation of delivery. There should have been two boxes, though. I thought we’d only picked one.

The address was a small post office off the Wantage Road. We got there in less than half an hour. Conversation was not exactly flowing along the way - I had to force it out of him.

“Watch and learn, eh? What’s there to be taught?”

Phil said nothing, kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead. He looked uncomfortable with this as well. Finally he spoke.

“Look, chap, Paul’s right. We don’t send newbies out on a run – not even with another driver – until they’re...well, established. There’s certain procedures to follow that are easy to balls up unless you’re fully genned up on the firm’s procedures.”

“You what? It’s just a delivery, for God’s sake. Apart from spanking the van or getting the delivery address wrong, how can it be ballsed up?”

Phil shot me a warning look from the corner of his eye. “Just watch, learn and keep yer mouth shut. I’m not being a cunt about this, honest, but you’ll see what I mean when we make the drop. No questions.”

I opened my mouth. No questions? That’s like a red flag to a bull.

“Ok, Phil, I’ll bow to your experience on this one. Just tell me a bit more about the firm. How long have you been here? And what’s it like to work for them? Truth, mate. I can see you’re not happy here.”

Phil flicked another scowl at me as he came off the mini roundabout.

“Just a job, that’s all. No better or worse than any other. Been here two years now. Had to relocate from London when they started the switch over to here. Didn’t mind that, they gave a good relocation package. And they put me through the MEWP course. You don’t exactly sweat in this job, that’s why there’s only two of us...” A pained expression passed over his already sour visage.

“Two? Where’s the other one, then?”

“Got two newbies started today...pair o’ fucking wankers...you’ll be taking over Paul’s job.”

“The other storeman, then? Who’s he? Where is he?”

“Jim Doyle. Nice old boy. Suspended subject to a disciplinary hearing. Poor fucker.”

The tone of this answer surprised me. Sounded like Jim was going in front of a firing line rather than being given a written warning.

“What’s he done, then? Knock off the MD’s wife?”

“Accidentally opened a storage box a coupla days ago.. Client weren’t happy, demanded a full investigation and...” he raised his eyes skyward as he quoted the company mantra “...the necessary corrective action. Cunts.”

I pondered this. I knew how strict the firm was on this, but the way Phil was speaking it sounded like Jim would be out the door for what was really a minor – and accidental – indiscretion.

“Hang on, if he accidentally opened it – in the warehouse, yeah?”

Phil nodded grimly.

“How did the client find out about it? Did Jim...disclose any of the contents to anyone?”

Phil shook his head and pulled the vehicle to a halt

“Someone in the warehouse grass him up, then?”

A silence. Pregnant with guilt.

“So you saw the contents too. What was in them?”

“We’re here, ” Phil muttered. “Get the box, chap.”

Conversation over. Obviously a sore point. I made a mental note to ask Paul more about this when I got back.

I stepped out of the Transit and opened the rear doors, blowing into my hands to warm them. It had turned chilly; only to be expected at this time of year.

Pulling the box towards me I glanced at the post office. Bright sunlight was reflecting off the plate glass windows, dazzling me. That was why I didn't see the police patrol car and the ambulance at first.

They were parked at the side of the post office, both vehicles occupied, but the drivers inside didn't seem to be moving much. Something not quite right there...

I shrugged and hefted the box, moving towards the entrance.

"Just leave it there, chap," Phil ordered. "The client will be here in a minute. By the pillar box, that'll do."

I dropped it as requested, frowning. This was bloody weird.

"Thought the drop-off point was the post office?"

"It is. But not inside."

I opened my mouth to speak when a thought struck me. I turned back to the ambulance and patrol car.

Now I knew what had troubled me. The two cops inside the car were still immobile, as were the two paramedics in the ambulance. Completely still, motionless. The near side door of the ambulance was ajar, and the passenger was in the process of stepping out of the vehicle. His booted foot hovered a few inches off the ground. Completely still.

The beacons on the tops of the vehicles were illuminated, but they weren't turning.

I turned back to the road. I thought the traffic was unusually quiet for such a busy road. But in the far distance, back towards Didcot, I could see a small vehicle approaching.

Or rather, it would have been approaching if it were moving. It had stopped still. The plumes of white smoke from the power station's cooling towers, normally belching out into the Oxfordshire skyline night and day, had stopped moving. The cooling towers hadn't stopped working, smoke was still being emitted.

But like everything around us, the smoke had stopped moving. As if frozen in time.

The door of the post office opened suddenly, the squeak of unoiled hinges grating on my ears in what had been perfect but unnatural silence. A man emerged.

He was in his late forties, balding and overweight, a businessman by the look of the suit. He blinked at us, a confused expression on his face.

"What's happened? Everything...everything's stopped."

"Yeah, it does that," Phil shrugged, a cigarette in his mouth. "Don't worry, it'll all become clear when the client arrives. It always does."

Their voices had a strange quality to them, as if I was hearing them through a barrier of thick plastic or foam. Slightly muffled with a strange echo. And yet they were right next to me.

I turned from Phil to the businessman and back to Phil again. My head was swimming.

"What...what the bloody hell's going on? What sort of delivery is this?"

Phil breathed out through his nostrils, twin plumes of smoke curling around his head. Smoke that slowly stopped moving and became a semi-solid fog. He shook his head and moved sideways.

“Shit, I forget this happens. Should pack in soon, anyway...”

I watched him crouch down beside the box, pulling out a pen. I gently prodded the wall of smoke. It yielded slightly, like a half-deflated balloon.

The businessman stared at me, an imploring look in his eyes. “I don’t understand...I can’t remember what I’m doing here...or why I came here in the first place. I don’t...I don’t get it.”

“That makes two of us, mate,” I said sympathetically, disturbed by the sound my own voice was making. Felt like I had cotton wool in my ears. And mouth, too. It was an effort to speak, as though I had to force my words out into the air. “Phil! An explanation, please.”

Phil waved an irritated hand at me, concentrating on filling out the details on the delivery note. “Not yet, chap. I’m busy.” He looked up. “Ah. Here he comes.”

Steady footsteps, the sound of well made shoes advancing down the gravelled path that ran alongside the post office.

The man that appeared was tall, about six foot five. A smart black coat, unbuttoned, showed an expensive business suit and a sober but obviously equally expensive tie. I’m no expert on office wear, but everything from the overcoat to the polished leather shoes screamed expense and quality, a sharp contrast to the clothes worn by the confused businessman he now stood next to.

It was difficult to judge his age. Very few lines on his face, no facial hair and short but not cropped black hair. He could've been in his early thirties, but he carried himself with the air of one much older.

He smiled to both of us, a brief but warm and genuine smile of welcome. This made him seem younger, almost boyish, until I saw his eyes.

They were a striking colour, a cold deep blue that put me in mind of Norwegian fjords. It might have been an effect of the strange time-frozen sunlight, but it seemed that there were flecks of gold in both irises.

But the overwhelming impression was that of age. It's true what they say; some people can look younger than they really are, but it's always the eyes that give you away. Age is carried in the way you look at the world, at other people, and the client was no exception to this.

His gaze was hypnotic. His eyes locked onto mine...and seemed to go further. As though he was reading my mind.

“You must be the new employee.” His voice was deep but not booming, with no trace of any regional accent. Well spoken, almost Received Pronunciation, reminded me of Oliver Nigell, but it didn't sound like a way of speech that came naturally to him. Almost as though it had been learned.

Still, it was a voice that commanded attention – and respect. He offered a hand, his gaze not wavering for a second. “Welcome to Adasantsat. Hope you're settling in okay.”

I found it hard to reply as I shook his hand. Firm, crisp handshake, no sweaty palm or excessive grasp. And still that cold, appraising and penetrating gaze.



“Morning, sir,” Phil Ross’s voice was low, almost timorous. I saw that he had hastily thrown his cigarette away as the client had approached. The smoke no longer had my attention. I was riveted to the events unfolding around me. “Delivery as requested for you.”

The client released my hand and turned to face Phil. “Ah yes, I see. Very prompt service as usual. Thank you.” He signed the delivery note, peeled off and retained the top copy, and handed the carbon to Phil. Phil’s hand was shaking as he took it. The client stared hard at Phil. “I trust this box has not been...examined. Like the last one?”

Phil shook his head frantically. The client smiled, nodding in approval before turning from us and picking up the box. I tried to catch Phil’s eye, but he looked at the ground instead.

Fuck this, I thought. I called out to the client, who was examining the barcode label on the archive box. There was an unhealthy grin on his face. Teeth bared, brilliantly white and even teeth, a smile of anticipation that looked almost like...hunger.

“Excuse me. Nice to meet you, but I didn’t catch your name.”

If the silence was unnatural before it was completely unearthly now. Phil’s face had turned white. I grinned at him.

The client lowered the box and turned to me. His eyebrows furrowed slightly, the gaze from those impossibly gold-flecked blue eyes turned colder. Then he smiled.

“I’m sorry. I thought your workmates would have told you. My name is Mr Golien.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr Golien.” Strange bloody name. Where did that come from?

“You like asking questions, don’t you?” His eyes turned towards Phil, who looked like he was on the verge of having a severe stroke. He looked back to me. “I find that...refreshing. Too few people take a genuine interest in their work these days.

“I’ve a feeling you and I will be seeing each other again soon. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

The confused businessman stared, bewildered, at the box offered to him by our client. The lid was peeled away, the opened box held one-handed by Mr Golien. Twenty kilos in one hand and the bloke was holding it as though it was an egg box.

“Mr Lander, I believe these are yours?”

The businessman bent over the box, stared at the contents. Mr Golien dropped the lid and delved into the box, pulling out a brown manilla folder.

“I think you remember now?”

Phil grabbed my shoulder as the client turned to us. Mr Golien nodded once, a dismissal.

“Let’s go. *Now.*”

I shook myself free. “Not yet. I want to see – “

“We *don’t* stay for the handover! Terms of the contract. We deliver, get the signature...and never look back. Get in the fucking van.”

Never look back. Yeah, right. The wheels of the Transit spun, gravel spinning as Phil swung it onto Wantage Road. He put his foot down, trying to

put as much distance between us and the handover as possible. Handover, not a delivery.

The noise from the engine was suddenly drowned out by the scream of sirens. The beacons on the police car and the ambulance were moving again. I could hear doors slamming, and in the side mirror I could see the two coppers running into the post office.

Running *through* Mr Lander and Mr Golien. I couldn't see much after that, but I was aware of the businessman falling to his knees and what looked like a scream coming from his wide-open mouth. A scream that was caused by the paper that Golien was holding out for him to see.

The journey back was tense. Phil didn't say a word to me, just kept his eyes rigidly fixed on the road ahead, knuckles white where he clenched the steering wheel in anger. Or fear. His eyes had flicked to his side-mirror when Lander had fallen to his knees and screamed. He'd definitely seen it. But wasn't prepared to comment. And I was too shocked and bewildered by what I'd seen to try and engage him in conversation.

Watch and learn. Keep your mouth shut. No questions.

Bollocks. If this was a typical Adasantsat delivery, there were some serious questions that would need answering.

Those questions were not going to be answered that day. When we got back Paul beckoned Phil into the office, giving me a hard look before pointing me in the direction of two lads who were breaking down pallets. After being shown how the handheld barcode scanners worked I spent the rest of the afternoon putting boxes to shelf with the scissor lift. The two storemen kept

their conversation to a minimum, trying not to talk to me unless it was absolutely necessary. Even then, it was strictly regarding technical issues, the barcode scanning, where the boxes went, and so forth. They tried not to even look me in the face. I was obviously in someone's bad books. Or perhaps the results of Jim's disciplinary had been announced and made public to the staff.

Paul had gone out on a delivery himself. Bang went my chance of asking him the questions I wanted answers to.

But when I got home later that night and put the TV on one of my questions was answered.

It had made both the national and the local news. An armed robbery in a post office in Harwell. The robbers had made their getaway long before the police arrived, and the ambulance that followed was too late to save the life of some misguided have-a-go hero. The post office clerk was seriously injured, but the surgeons at the John Radcliffe had miraculously managed to save her life. Stefan Lander, an insurance advisor from Wantage, was not so fortunate. He was shot in the face as he tried to wrestle the shotgun from one of the raiders.

The whole incident occurred at 11:15 am. Ten minutes before we had arrived to make the delivery to Mr Golien.

I had to force myself into work the next day. What I had seen – hell, what I had *participated* in – was scary enough. I'd witnessed something incredible. A time warp, time-freeze, whatever you want to call it. And a conversation with a man who had died ten minutes previously. A man intact, even though his head had been blown away. I'd had all night to think it over,

tried to put some rational spin on the events. Nothing would fit. And the more I thought it over, the more I got scared. My first instinct had been to question it – and I'd questioned the very people, my workmates, who thought it normal. Well, not normal but acceptable.

How the hell could this be acceptable? How could you go in day after day, doing something that you knew defied logical explanation? Why wouldn't you question it – even challenge it?

No, that was bloody silly, I told myself as I rolled over in bed, trying to force myself to sleep. Wherever you go, wherever you work, most people just accept things they don't agree with. Take it on the chin and get on with it. "Just doing my job." "I do what I'm told." They do it out of fear of upsetting the bosses, fear of marking their own cards. Fear of losing their jobs.

That was the key. Fear. But the fear that gripped the employees of Adasantsat was something else. This wasn't fear of losing jobs. This was something else. It was a fear that was taking hold of me now. For the first time in my working life I was reluctant to ask questions. Not just because of the reaction – I had a feeling that losing my job, being still in the probationary period, was the least of my concerns. No, I was more scared of the answers that I might get. Answers that my workmates had written all over their faces.

Another true saying. Fears are worse at night, and daylight will diminish them, if not banish them completely. After a restless night, with no more than two to three hours sleep, I woke feeling tired but more confident. It was just a job, that was all. If these guys wouldn't answer my questions, fuck 'em. I'd find something else. As I scraped the razor over my chin I stared into my reflected

eyes, trying to find the confidence I told myself I was feeling. The eyes were shrunken, a haunted look I'd never seen before. I blinked fiercely. No, that's not me, that's not how I look or feel. Confidence. You have the right to ask. You've got the guts to ask, to put others on the spot. That's rare. Embrace it. Glory in it.

That's better. I grinned back at the reflection as I wiped foam from under my left ear. Turning my head to make sure there was none remaining I noticed something odd. The overhead light had caught my eyes in a different angle. My eyes are a mix of hazel and dirty green, and previous women I've known have always remarked on them, told me they're my best feature. Said that they almost make up for the way I smile too much and too quickly, often in inappropriate circumstances. The fact that they change colour according to different light conditions has never been of interest to me. It's never been enough to keep said women interested long enough. Certainly not Jackie, nor the two birds she'd caught me with last month that led to the break up.

It was odd. The lighting conditions in the bathroom weren't changing. Perhaps it was the steam. Perhaps it was the fatigue from my lack of sleep.

But something was glinting in the irises. Almost like flecks of gold.

That morning I took advantage of the £1.99 breakfast special in the canteen. The weather had taken a turn for the colder, a sharp frost that had taken ages to scrape from the Toyota's windscreen and had sharpened my desire for warmth and good food. Amazing how a full belly can inspire such a sense of well-being and confidence. Confidence that had taken such a knock with the reflected sight of my eyes. But I hadn't seen that gold-flecked iris

effect in the rear view mirror as I drove off to work, so it was safe to assume that that had been down to the lack of sleep and general full-scale weirdness I'd been subjected to yesterday.

Well, today's another day, I told myself as I mopped up the last of the egg yolk and tomato juice with a thick slice of buttered bloomer. The day I get answers. I was sitting on my own, some of the warehouse staff had come in a few minutes after my breakfast was served and had deliberately sat at a different table. Backs towards me. I chuckled as I sipped my tea. Stuck in Coventry after only one day. Hell of an impression I was making.

I wasn't on my own for long. A middle aged man in a suit sat down opposite me.

"Morning. And you are...?"

"Good morning, Mark. My name's Peter Tyndall."

Well, well. The managing director himself. Now I had a face to put to a name. I sat back, wiped my mouth and smiled politely.

"Don't mind if I have a little chat with you, do you Mark? Unless you wanted to be on your own..."

"Not at all. Glad of the company. I seem to have upset a few people." I gestured to the diners on the opposite table.

"Don't worry about them. I've always said popularity's overrated."

I couldn't help myself, I laughed at that. Tyndall seemed normal, well, as normal as an MD can be. Although he looked tired and drawn – a consequence of the late night calls – he also looked youngish, early forties, and wasn't running to flab and baldness as most execs do. Unlike Lander. Looked more like Golien, come to think of it.

I shivered. Tyndall noticed. He leant back in the chair, fingers still steepled. His eyes narrowed, his gaze appraising.

“You’ve noticed a certain...atmosphere.” His smile was frozen. “Don’t worry too much about it. Our team aren’t used to people asking questions the way you do. Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s admirable. And the client was impressed also.

“Do you know what he said to me?” Tyndall asked, leaning forward, a conspiratorial look in his eye. “That man has great potential. See he doesn’t waste it.’ Now...what do you think Mr Golien meant by that?”

I frowned. The warmth imbibed by my forced self-confidence and the breakfast was beginning to evaporate in the cold appraising gaze of the MD.

“I’ve no idea, Mr Tyndall. What do you think?” I forced myself to look up from the mug I was drinking from. To face his gaze without flinching.

“I see. A question with a question.” He smiled. Then stood up. “You’re destined for great things, young man. All I will say is this...”

He looked back to the management types sitting on the table behind us. Then he turned his gaze to the storemen. All were talking, all wrapped up in their own little worlds. But no matter how hard they tried to cover it up, all of their attention was fixed on us. All looked out of the corners of their eyes, their interest poorly masked by their forced conversations to each other, listening to what the Big Boss was saying to the new guy.

“Remember where you started. And remember that everything has its price. Every endeavour it’s reward and it’s punishment. And...”

And this is where I get really scared. To see such a look of pain...no not, pain. *Despair* was what I saw on his face.



“...a reward can be punishment. Remember what I forgot.”

The words were unsettling enough. But what made them really unnerving was the way he delivered them. In a whisper, with a quick backward glance to his management minions and his warehouse staff, as if hoping that they didn't hear him.

As if his admission of fear would be fuel to their own ambitions. Or confirmation of their own fears.

Tyndall's words haunted me as I reported to Paul for the morning work detail. The morning was spent sorting out returns, and Paul felt that I'd gained enough experience to supervise the two youngsters who had just started. They were breaking down two pallets of returns, placing selected boxes in cages and wheeling them over to a marked off area. The list we were working on was the Destruction List, an inventory of boxes that were no longer required to be stored for the client. Old, obsolete data. A stores team member would take these at a later date to an incineration unit on the outskirts of Oxford for destruction.

A lot of the boxes had labels on them that showed they had been stored here at Adasantsat, been called away on retrieval requests and returned several times. It seemed that the average number of despatches for a box was ten.

Some of the boxes were ancient, falling apart, splitting at the seams. Some of the heavier boxes were newer. It was explained to me that the client would request a box and add more data to it. Then it would be returned. Of

course, when it got too full or the box was showing signs of wear and tear the client would rebox it with a new printout of the same barcode.

It was halfway through the second pallet that I realised that I hadn't seen Phil Ross.

The two youngsters with me were pissing around with the scanner guns, playing Cowboys and Indians. I barked an order to stop and they lowered their guns, staring sullenly at me. One stepped onto the blue pallet truck and began to skateboard away. I grabbed him by his hi-vis waistcoat and the pallet truck went from underneath him, banging into one of the racking uprights.

"All right, speedy," I growled into his ear. "Fun time's over. Back to work."

Muttering obscenities under his breath, he slouched back to the pallet that was being broken down. He pulled one of the storage boxes off and threw it to the ground. He looked up at me, a challenging look on his face.

"Pick it up," I said levelly.

He looked at the box on the floor. The brown parcel tape sealing the lid had broken and the lid had come away, the contents spilling out onto the floor. Sealed and tamper-proof, they had said at my interview. Yeah, right.

"Go on, pick 'em up," I said to the storeman. "No back-chat this time."

He started to put the papers back into the box. He frowned, something on one of the papers catching his attention.

Then his eyes widened in horror. He dropped the paper and stood up quickly. He swayed, his head clasped in his hands, moaning softly. My anger with him turned to concern.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?”

We all turned round in shock. Paul Maskell stormed from the office, heading straight towards us.

“You do *not* look at the contents of the boxes!” He grabbed the paper off the storeman, shoved it back in the box and hastily replaced the lid. He stood up and rounded on me. I’ve never seen such fury in another man’s face before. He looked like he was going to launch me.

It wasn’t just pure anger. This was fuelled by fear.

“You’ve been told – you’ve *all* been told. And *you* – “ his finger prodded my chest. “One of your duties is to ensure the confidentiality of the client’s paperwork. You lead by example, got it?” His hands were shaking as he reached for the tape gun and began sealing the box.

“Jesus, Paul, why the grief? He can’t put the papers back in the bloody box with his eyes closed! The box is going to be destroyed, anyway.” This was getting beyond a joke. The fear-fuelled anger of Paul Maskell was one thing – the terror-filled expression on the storeman was quite another.

“What did you see in the box, son?” I asked gently.

He stared dumbly at me, his jaw slack. His eyes seemed to have glazed over.

“Don’t answer him!” Paul snapped. “We’re in enough shit as it is!”

I turned away in disgust and headed for the restroom.

“You! Get back here!”

I turned to him and raised my eyebrows. “Don’t you think it’s about time we had a chat? I’ll get the coffee.”

Paul had calmed down slightly by the time he came into the canteen. With none of his staff to shout at, and no other company but me, he looked almost sheepish. But edgy.

“Right,” I said, passing him a cup of coffee from the vending machine. “We’re alone. No one can hear us – so there’s nothing to fear. Not from me, anyway.”

He looked up from his coffee sharply.

“Because that’s what it’s about, isn’t it? Fear. Even the MD’s shit scared. Your behaviour to me over the last coupla days is completely at odds with the welcome you gave me at the start. And all because I asked a few questions. I see why you didn’t want me to go out on that delivery. Christ, you must’ve been freaked out on your first run.

“And yet you carried on working here. You had the same attitude as Phil, did you? Keep the nose clean, get the job done, don’t ask questions. How many drops did it take for you to get used to it, to see it as normal?”

Paul swallowed noisily, then smiled weakly. “It took a few,” he admitted. “It’s why new guys don’t go out until fully...prepared.”

“Prepared? Interesting word. Covers a multitude of sins...”

Paul laughed as he took a sip of the coffee, coughing it back into the paper cup. Black Nescafe dribbled down his chin. He coughed twice, wiping the fluid away.

“Sins? *Multitude*? You have no idea!” He laughed again, coughed again.

I narrowed my eyes. His laughter was high-pitched, almost hysterical. It echoed around the empty canteen. Well, it was a start. Now I'd get my answers.

“Okay, Paul. Sins. Like...examining the client's data? A disciplinary offence, I know. I want to ask you about that, want to know who this Jim bloke is and why he's being DP'd. Okay, perhaps he was up to a few more naughties than Phil told me about, perhaps his case was different to the poor fucker you bawled out just now.

“As I said back in the warehouse, that box was on the Destruction List. It's useless to the client. Why the performance? What can possibly be in that data to get so freaked out by?”

Paul looked at the puddles of coffee on the tablecloth. He dipped a finger, tracing a straight line. “Can't you guess?”

He jumped as a loud ringing broke the silence, his finger jerking in the pattern he was making. He took a deep breath before answering the mobile.

“Oh Jesus. Oh my God, no...” he put a hand to his face, the phone clenched in his other hand, pressed into his ear as though trying to physically force it in. For a long time he said nothing, just took in each part of the conversation with a defeated, harrowed expression.

“Tyndall,” he said in a hoarse voice. “He's just told me that there's been a major accident on the A34. Serious stuff. Multi-vehicle pile up, three vehicles on fire...”

“One of our vans is involved. Phil...Phil was driving.”

Paul told me a bit more later as we headed back to the warehouse to share the news with the team. He spoke in lowered tones, almost a whisper. He had gone out yesterday on a delivery to the same destination me and Phil had gone to earlier that day, the Harwell post office. Turned out that there should have been two boxes going out to Mr Golien, not one. Paul had rushed out to put the error right. How that affected the drop I had no idea. What it had to do with Phil dying on the A34 was equally a mystery.

Or maybe not. The post office clerk was still in a critical condition. But she was alive. Now I remembered what had bothered me about the delivery note.

Two boxes were on the order. Phil had only picked one. Golien had probably been too wrapped up in Lander to notice the mistake until he had gone for the clerk and found she wasn't there.

"I don't need to ask you why you're telling me, Paul," I said sympathetically. "You mentioned an error that had been made by the stores team a long time ago. One you were reluctant to discuss. Is this the outcome, then? One fuck up and someone pays with their life?"

Paul visibly composed himself before answering. "Before I started, when the operation was still running out of London. Over twenty years ago there was a record number of boxes to deliver. July the 6<sup>th</sup>, 1988. One hundred and sixty seven boxes. All correct, no picking errors.

"But there should have been one hundred and sixty eight. Someone missed a box off the order sheet."

I thought back to what O'Neil and Nigel had said in my interview. "*It was about twenty years ago when Piper Alpha went up in flames. The*

*documents were connected with the incident, and they were required in Aberdeen urgently.”*

I had a vague memory of the tragedy, heard it on the news when I was a kid. The worst offshore oil disaster in history hadn't make much impact on me then, too far away and no one I knew had been involved. But one hundred and sixty eight boxes required...my blood ran cold.

“How many people died on the Piper Alpha?”

Paul looked knowingly at me before answering. “One less than there should have been. It wasn't until 1994, when one of the fifty-nine survivors took his own life that the issue was resolved. That box was delivered then.”

Now I understood. Now I knew what I was involved with. I just needed confirmation.

“Your busy periods...I'm guessing that they always coincide with disasters, terrorist attacks...anything where there's a large loss of life.

“And this is just the UK branch. Worldwide...fucking hell.”

Paul smiled humourlessly. “I think we all thanked our lucky stars that we weren't in the American branch in September 2001. Let alone branches in the Middle East or certain African nations. They have busy periods virtually every day.” Paul shrugged his shoulders, his hands upraised. “But remember one thing. Boxes go out even if it's...obvious... that they shouldn't. Piper Alpha is a case in point. We all know that not everyone who died deserved to be taken by the client. Ten, twenty, maybe. But every casualty? Every single person who dies, visited by the client?”

I frowned. This was something new. “I don't follow. What are you saying?”

Paul rolled his eyes and sighed. “After a major disaster so many boxes go out – but most of them come back untouched, unopened. Why do you think that is? *The client tries it on.*”

“No, you don’t understand yet, do you? But you will, in time. Look around you, Mark. This warehouse is almost full to capacity. We were told that the London site would be empty of data two years ago. Two years! And *still* it keeps on coming! Why is that?”

“Because the client has files on everyone. Not just the ones who are signed up to him. *Everyone.* The term for those files is “potential clients.” They...they have a last chance to sign the contract when they die. This is why time freezes, helps Adasantsat to get to them before...before the other party does.”

I could physically feel the blood draining from my face. “Oh, Jesus...”

“See why I didn’t wanna tell you?”

“I – I can see why you don’t let newbies out on deliveries until...until ‘prepared’”. My voice was hoarse. “That can mean only one thing. Anyone who works here has to be told, has to know the nature of the business. When does the company see fit to inform its workers?”

“After the probationary period expires. That’s when you’re guaranteed a job for life.”

A job for life. My blood chilled. Suddenly it looked like having a job for life was not the benefit it appeared on paper. Paul looked at me knowingly before going into the office to print out the orders, an unspoken thought shared between us.



A job for life didn't necessarily mean employment until retirement age. It could mean a job that lasted as long as the employee's life did. And there was nothing in writing that said an employee would live until retirement age.

Paul came out with a stack of printed orders. He passed several to me. One he looked at, considered it for a moment, and kept back.

"I'll pull this one," he said.

I nodded in agreement. It would've been unfair of him to make me pull the box labelled P Ross.

Twelve boxes in total were pulled and despatched. Again, Paul took it on himself to deliver the orders. I was in no state to face Mr Golien again, just yet.

Paul asked me to carry on with the Destruction List. The two youngsters, subdued by the news of Phil, were quiet and industrious. I left them to it and wandered back into the office.

I sat in Paul's chair and rubbed my eyes wearily. I'd got the answers I thought I wanted, and now I wished I'd never bloody asked for them. Time for decisions. There was no way I could stay here now, not after all the shit I'd uncovered. I'd go up in a moment and tell Tyndal to stuff the job.

Just close my eyes for a moment...

"We're off now, Mark. Lunch time"

I turned suddenly, stared blankly at the two storemen. I glanced at the clock on the wall. Bloody hell, one thirty already. One of them grinned at me.

"Typical bloody supervisor! Having a kip while we do all the work."

I smiled back. “Sorry, lads. Haven’t been getting much sleep lately. How long was I out?”

“Just half hour. Don’t worry, I won’t grass you up to management.” They both left, laughing amongst themselves.

I squeezed the bridge of my nose and looked at the PC screen. The homepage on the database screen still said **WELCOME, PAUL MASKELL**. In the mad rush and shocking news he’d forgotten to log himself out.

A thought struck me. As Storage Supervisor he would have more permissions than any of the stores staff. I wouldn’t have the same permissions until I took over his role. Yeah, right. As if that was going to happen.

Still, wouldn’t do any more harm in looking at what Paul had access to. I clicked on the welcome screen and stared at the options that came up.

**CURRENT ORDERS**...twelve of them, all with the same delivery address. Marcham Interchange, A34 Northbound. And yes, along with the unique box barcode was the title P Ross and what looked like his date of birth. I hit the back button and looked at the other options.

**RETURN TO STORE**...nothing there. Obviously all booked in and put back to shelf.

**CURRENT DESTRUCTION**...yes, that was what me and the two youngsters were working on. I clicked on that.

The screen went yellow for a moment, making me blink. Then a list was populated. Two hundred and twelve records, each entry coming up in the same format as an order request, and in date order, most recent last. Box barcode, title, date of birth...

The most recent one was no surprise. S Lander. I wondered if that was the box that had caused so much terror to the storesman who had dropped it and looked at the contents.

“No, Mark, it wasn’t,” a voice said behind me. I whirled round in the swivel chair. Peter Tyndall was standing in the doorway.

He looked tired and strained. His tie was loosened around his collar, his hair was dishevelled and his face pale and drawn. He entered and closed the door. He nodded towards the PC monitor.

“Paul hasn’t told you everything, I see.”

“He’s told me enough. Jesus Christ, Tyndall. How can you put up with this? How can you expect anyone to do this job without going insane? Why do you do it?”

A faint smile. “You’re implying that we have a choice. Did he tell you about the contract? Probationary period? No, I bet he didn’t. I need to discuss that with you.” He pulled over one of the chairs and sat down next to me. He looked at the screen, sighed softly and shook his head.

Yellow was the wrong choice of background colour for this database. And Paul had the contrast set to high. Turning back to Tyndall I had white blotches in my vision. For a moment it looked like Tyndal had specks of yellow in his eyes. I blinked, squeezed my eyes shut and opened them again.

“Seeing things, young Mark?”

“No,” I muttered. “Screen’s a bit too bright, that’s all.”

“Ah yes, the screen.” Tyndall leant forward. “Click on the most recent entry.”

“Lander, yeah?”

“Yes, Mr Lander. The gentlemen you met yesterday.”

I did as instructed. Up came a screen I hadn’t seen before.

**ARCHIVE CONTENTS – Please select**

The screen contained a listing of every single item that was in the box.

“As you can see, everything is catalogued. We’re in talks with the client to scan the items, have them in a digital format. It would make deliveries so much more...”

“Bearable?”

He frowned. “Cost effective is the selling point we used. However, money is of no object to the client – “

“And he prefers the traditional methods of pen and paper.” I quoted from the managers’ response in my interview. I clicked on a random entry on the screen. I stared at it in surprise and whistled. “He’s got a point. The last thing he’d want is these things being accessed by a hacker. Or left on a laptop or flash drive and being lost on the Underground.”

“Quite,” Tyndall sighed. “His response exactly.”

I shook my head at what I was seeing. “Seems this Lander bloke wasn’t the quiet family guy the press painted him as. Some real dodgy dealing going on here. Bribes, backhanders...healthy bank balances, too healthy by the look of them. Didn’t think insurance paid that well.”

“It doesn’t.”

“How come all this is on file? I can’t imagine Lander would want anyone *knowing* about this, let alone having it in black and white.”

Tyndall cocked his head and stared at me. “He didn’t have a choice. The client insists. All part of the Terms and Conditions of the contract.”

I frowned. “You’re losing me. What, was he employed by him then?”

“In a way.” Tyndall closed his eyes and rubbed his neck. He rolled his shoulders and head, wincing. “I’ll be glad to come off the rota. It’s your turn tomorrow.”

“Now hang on a minute – “

“Mark.” He smiled knowingly. “I know what you’re going to say. I know you have cold feet, you’re thinking of pulling out. That’s why I need to talk about your contract with you. I need to show you something.”

We left the office, walked over to the returns pallet. The Lander box was on the top of the returns pile.

“So what was it that freaked the young’un out?”

“His father died last month. Heart attack. It was his box that he...inadvertently opened. Shocking way to learn what your old dad is really about, don’t you think?”

“As his father passed away the client had no need of the records anymore. That is why it was returned to us, on the Destruction List. That is why Mr Lander’s box is no longer required.”

Defying the orders of the contract with the client, Peter Tyndall opened the box and pulled out a sheet of paper. “I said Mr Lander was employed by the client, in a way. And he was. Not a regular contract of employment, as such, but something more binding.” He handed it to me.

As I held it in my hands I realised it wasn’t paper. It was parchment. The writing on it hadn’t been done with a laser or inkjet printer. This was handwritten, a flowing river of words that was almost beautiful to look at. Like

the most stunning piece of calligraphy I'd ever seen. All in black, apart from the signature at the base, below the name of Stefan Lander.

Lander's own signature. It was old, but even if the date hadn't given it away the fading and discolouration of the liquid used for the signature would have done.

Faded and discoloured, but still unmistakably blood.

I lowered the parchment and handed it back to Tyndall. I didn't want to read the finer points of the contract.

"Every single box in our archives contains one of those. The rest of the documents...well, they vary from individual to individual. No one's life story is the same now, is it?"

"Returns," I whispered. "Why are there returns? If the boxes are called out when these people die, surely they're only needed once. Why don't they all come back on the Destruction List?"

"The boxes don't just go out upon the death of the subject. Every seven years the contract must be renewed. The client needs to add fresh data, new documentation on his client's lives and sins to their individual files. That's when the client adds new archives to the file. Until the individual passes away... no live file is ever complete."

New archives. Lives and sins...

"Oh, Jesus..." That was it. I was getting out, now. I turned, heading for the exit.

"Going for lunch, are you?" Tyndall asked meaningfully.

"Yeah. And I ain't coming back. You can shove this job, Tyndall." I was at the door when he called out to me.

“You can’t leave, Mark. You signed a contract as well.”

I halted, my hand on the pushbar. I smiled as I turned back.

“No, *Peter*. I’m still on probationary, remember?”

Tyndall laughed softly and walked towards me. He put his hand on the pushbar, next to mine.

“Did you read the contract thoroughly, young man?”

“Yeah,” I said hoarsely. “I don’t put my name to anything without knowing what I’m signing up for. Fine toothcomb, Pete. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Really.” He had a sad smile on his face, pitying. “I think you’d better go home and read it again. Nothing out of the ordinary? What did you sign it with?”

I laughed in his face. “Well, I didn’t sign it in blood like the stupid fuckers in these - ” The words froze in my mouth.

Tyndall sighed. “Didn’t you? Go home and have another look at it. I’ll be waiting.”

I hadn’t intended to return. I’d been determined to slam the door on Adasantsat Storage and never look back. But when I got home and pulled out my Terms and Conditions of Employment from the expanding folder, staring at the document in mounting horror and disbelief, I knew I was going to have to return.

Tyndall was right. I didn’t have a choice. None of the employees at Adasantsat did. Least of all me.

Graham O’Neil and Oliver Nigel did though. The two managers who’d interviewed me, who hadn’t shown up at the firm since. They had more in common with Mr Golien than I’d realised. Not just a shared taste in made up names.

I parked sloppily, slamming the door. Trudging my way to the storage facility, my shoulders slumped, I pondered the contract again. I could have kicked myself. The small print was there, in black and white. How could I have been so bloody stupid? Had the pain from the falling picture, the cut on my finger dulled my senses?

*The company reserves the right to extend or reduce your probationary period as it deems appropriate.* I’d seen that as standard. A lot of firms extend it if you have too much time off sick or commit breaches of their disciplinary procedure, that’s standard business practice. Very few firms think you’re such a golden boy that they’ll reduce it.

Yet that’s what they’d done to me. On my way out of the flat I’d noticed a letter on the doormat addressed to me. A letter from the Personnel department, congratulating me on my outstanding performance and notifying me that my probationary period had ended with effect from yesterday’s date. After only two days I was a fully-fledged member of the company. And as such, had a job for life.

Signed in blood. Well, I hadn’t used a quill dipped into a cut vein. But it was my blood on the contract, just over my signature. I’d only realised that when I looked at my copy and wondered where the stain had gone. I’d kept the bloodstained copy and sent the clean one to the HR manager. I was sure of it.



I was obviously wrong. There was no trace of blood on my copy whatsoever.

I'd thought of going to the Personnel department to ask to see my records, have a closer look at what I'd sent them. There was no point.

The HR manager had signed herself as Ms E Olgin. There was only one place my records would be kept.

I just wondered what shelf location my archive storage box had. Was there a special bay for Adasantsat employees? Or was it stored alphabetically? After all, with so many boxes coming out and so few returning there were plenty of gaps on the shelves.

I pulled open the door. I couldn't see anyone about, but I saw the rear of one of the scissor lifts disappearing into the racking of the centre aisle.

I frowned as I realised that the coat hooks didn't have the youngsters' coats on them. They were still out to lunch.

Tyndall's suit jacket was there, though. So he was the only one who could be in that scissor lift.

"Pete?" I called out. "You in there?"

I advanced towards the centre aisle. I could hear the incessant beep-beep-beep of an ascending scissor lift. Going down the aisle I could see Tyndall, his hand pushing the joystick down. At his feet was an archive storage box. Attached to the front guide rail was something that looked thin rope or heavy twine.

"Pete! What you doing?"

Tyndall turned over his shoulder, caught my eyes and smiled sadly. He released the joystick and the machine stopped.

“You got the letter then, Mark. Congratulations. You’ll be getting another letter shortly. Selected people can rise very quickly within the firm. ”

“Selected? What the fuck does that mean? Selected by who?”

Tyndall shook his head slowly. “The client has great plans for you. Just remember what I said when we first met.” He pushed the joystick forwards, the machine ascended to the very top of the warehouse. He leaned over the front safety rails of the scissor lift. At first I thought he was looking for something.

Then he leant backwards, kicked the platform extension release pedal and pushed the extension forwards. The blue rope tied to the front was lifted and placed around his neck.

A noose. The only thing Tyndall was searching for was a way out.

Satisfied that the modification to the scissor lift was appropriate to his task, and ignoring my shouted requests to stop, Tyndall clambered over the guide rails and jumped.

The rope that unravelled had a length of about eight feet. Just enough length for the tightened noose to snap the MD’s spine with a wet cracking sound that echoed around the warehouse.

I swayed on my feet, legs turned to jelly, overcome with the horror I’d witnessed. My first thought was for a phone, I had to get the police out here. Too late for an ambulance, but –

“No need to contact the authorities, Mark. We’ll take care of that.”

I swallowed noisily. I thought I’d been alone, I’d heard no footsteps approaching after the incident. That meant they had been behind me all this time, watching Tyndall’s suicide. Doing nothing about it but watching.

“We see he’s saved you the trouble of picking the box.” It was O’Neil who spoke this time. “And of course, there’s no requirement for you to deliver it. The client can collect it ourselves.”

*What?*

I turned to face O’Neil and Nigel. They were both smiling, both looking at me, and I knew it was no trick of the overhead lights that caused their irises to appear flecked with gold. I knew what their link to the client was.

“The client can collect it ourselves...” I smiled grimly. “Took me a while to figure that bit out. Mr Golien. G O’Neil. O Nigel.

“And of course, E Olgin from Personnel. So many of you, and yet only one name. One name that fits all. *For you are many.*”

O’Neil clapped his hands in mock applause. “Legion doesn’t give you many options for name variations, we will admit. You can call us by our...more well known title if you prefer.”

Now I started to laugh. I was all too aware that my laughter was high-pitched, almost the hysterical laughter that came from Paul Maskell earlier.

“Adasantsat Storage. Y’know, as soon as I figured out the Legion part it didn’t take long to work out what that title is an anagram of. Do you want a giggle? At first it came out as Santa’s Data. But no...”

O’Neil shook his head while Nigel smiled patiently.

“Not Santa’s Data,” I continued. “*Definitely* not Santa. Santa gives – you just take. You take it *all.*”

Nigel spread his hands. “It is ours to take. You’re damned. All of you.”

My laughter turned to anger. “Bollocks! Everyone who died on Piper Alpha, everyone who dies in a natural disaster, a terrorist attack - don’t you

*dare* tell me that their souls all belong to you. What about the innocent? Children? How can you tell me that they signed contracts in their own blood?”

“A fair point, Mark. It is only the adults – the easily tempted, the easily corruptible – who willingly sell their souls. The others...the ‘innocents’ as people like you insist on calling them...well, we’re involved in a dispute with the other party who believes the souls are his to keep. A business dispute, a question of breach of contract, but this is a case that no Earthly lawyer can involve himself in.

“We take them nevertheless. His agents visit them afterwards and attempt to release them. Sadly, we’ve had to let quite a few go.”

“But our stock never remains depleted for long,” O’Neil said, smugly. “For very...’innocent’ that we are forced to release, there are a score or more who willingly sell themselves.” He looked around the warehouse, grinning at the corpse dangling down the extension platform of the scissor lift. “The archives get bigger and fatter for those. And eventually, the full bays will overtake the empty ones. We believe that the time will come shortly when we once again need to expand our storage facility. The contract’s escalation is only a matter of time, and we need quality staff. Such a shame that Mr Tyndall let us down.”

“Not cut out for the job,” said Nigel. “A tragedy. He showed so much promise in the early years. Still, he’s only human.”

“Only human. You see Mark, this is the problem we have. We are dependant on human beings to run this operation. We may be legion, but we can only spread ourself so thinly. The physical storage of these precious archives is an all too earthly requirement. Of course, the majority of our stores

teams do not think too deeply and just get on with what they're asked to do. But there's always one or two who will insist on thinking. On asking questions. On opening boxes. None of you remember Pandora." His eyes bored into mine, the same unearthly penetrating gaze that Golien confronted me with.

"The contract is normally enough to keep these...individuals in line. As Ross and Maskell told you, no-one goes out on a delivery until the probationary period expires and the contract is firmly in place."

"And no-one is going to risk breaching that contract, are they?" I smiled mirthlessly. "And if anyone fucks up...Jesus, fear is a powerful weapon, isn't it? Kept Paul Maskell in line – not Phil, though, and obviously not Jim. Tyndall?"

"As we said, a pity. However, this wasn't entirely unforeseen. Mr Tyndall's position will not remain unfilled for long. "

O'Neil put his arm around my shoulders. I stiffened.

"We like to promote and recruit from within." His voice was soft and sibilant, a snake's hiss. "I believe you were informed of this by your previous employer? We were hoping to move Paul Maskell into the role of more senior management, but we believe he'll be happier – and secretly relieved - if he remains on the shop floor.

"You, however...you are a very special individual. You have more in common with us than you realise."

"You have a certain look in your eyes," Nigel added with no sense of irony. It wasn't lost on me though. I felt like screaming, running away from that burning, gold-flecked gaze with pupils that were pinpricks of the ultimate darkness, but I knew there was nowhere to run to. There was no escape –

even Tyndall knew that. Where he went now only O’Neil, Nigel and Golien – Legion – knew. It would be no respite though. It was an act of ultimate despair.

“That’s why we took the decision to end your probationary period so rapidly. You came very highly recommended from your previous employers.”

I shook his arm away and moved backwards. “Say what?”

Nigel grinned, his teeth gleaming. “Your reference came to us before you applied for the job. Before you were even considered for redundancy.”

“This has all been planned. Preordained, if you prefer,” O’Neil added, his bared teeth an exact mirror image of Nigel’s – and Mr Golien’s, come to think of it. “You are ours. You have always been ours.”

I stepped backwards, hands raised. “No. No fucking way.”

O’Neil advanced, his head inclining forward, his eyes burning into mine.

“Signed in blood, young man. That confirms it. But you sold yourself to us the moment you lied on your application. Stores Manager of two warehouses? Your salary was a lie, also. Did you not think it odd that we gave you a higher salary than you quoted?”

Despite my fear, my continued retreat, an urge to laugh overcame me. I halted.

“A lie? Is that all it took? Fuck me, *Mister* Legion, everyone lies on their CVs. Everyone! How else d’you get the job? Shit, get real!”

“A little white lie?” Nigel raised his eyebrows. “An embellishment here, a covered-up gap in employment history there...a half-hearted attempt to deceive your wife. Sorry, your *ex*-wife.

“Yes, little lies. A drop in the ocean, you may say in your defence.

Everyone does it, its no big deal, you bleat.

“Yet what is an ocean but a massive concentration of these little drops?

Everything adds up, young Mark. A drop in your eyes merely adds to that ocean in ours. A sea. A massive, undulating ever-rising sea. A sea of sins, ever increasing, forever becoming deeper with each drowning soul that is inadvertently sold to us by the little sins. You become mired in your sins so greatly that after a while you don't know the difference between the little sins and the greater ones. That is when we step in, open your eyes to *what you really are, what you have become*. Then, with a fresh contract we can really do business. We can help you make the most of yourself, make these sins work for you in this life. There are so many pleasures that those sins can buy, so much comfort and riches. Why not enjoy your time on this plane while you can? You're damned anyway, after death you are ours regardless. Why be a martyr to it?”

I laughed, my confidence returning and starting to overcome my fear. I remembered how I'd look at myself yesterday, the confidence I'd felt over the breakfast before I met and spoke with Tyndall. For that moment, I forced myself to forget what I'd physically seen of myself in the mirror, ignored the harrowed face and words of Tyndall. The confidence. The arrogance. I stuck with that. I made myself stick to it. If I slipped once, I'd realise what I was doing, what and who I was up against and I'd stumble and fall. And there'd be no recovery from that.

“Pretty speech, Mr Legion. No sale, though.”

O'Neil and Nigel glanced at each other. The smiles froze before turning back to me and widening with false warmth.

“You’ve got the bloody cheek to lecture me about lies – but what are you? The Master of Lies, the ultimate deceiver. Oh yeah, I remember some of my Sunday School lessons! Funny how some of the stuff you thought was absolute shite as a kid still sticks, becomes a help as an adult!

“We’re human. We all fall, we all sin. But don’t you dare stand there and tell me that it automatically makes us *yours*. That putting a bit of blood to a contract is just ‘enhancing’ the sale for our benefit. If we all belong to you, you don’t need us to hand over our souls on paper. That’s just your warm-up before you go in for the big sell. Go on, Beelzebollocks. Pick the bones outa that one.”

I must admit, I was quite proud of that little speech at the time. I folded my arms and glared at them both defiantly.

I should have known what to expect. An entity that was as old as God, had ensnared innumerable human souls – would it be humbled by me? Swayed by my argument? Of course not. They had me.

You see, after my little outburst they took me back into the office and showed me their copy of my contract. They pointed out the section that explained the company’s disciplinary procedure.

*Any attempt to open the boxes or inspect the contents is a gross breach of discipline, and is dealt with accordingly.* Tyndall had opened the archive box, but I had looked at it. *Inspected* it.



“The Disciplinary Procedure is explained quite clearly in the Employee Handbook. Perhaps you were not issued with a copy?” Nigel’s eyes glinted, his very words mocking me. “A failing on our Personnel Department’s side. We do apologise. We will have a word with them about that. In the meantime, please take this copy.”

I thought Tyndall had been doing me a favour by showing what was within the archives. He hadn’t. He was merely making his departure easier for the company by tying me more rigidly to it.

I’m looking at this procedure in the Company Handbook now. It’s seven in the morning and I haven’t been to bed yet. An empty vodka bottle lies on the sofa beside me. I wish I could feel drunk.

Sunlight is prodding through the curtains. It’s going to be a beautiful day by all accounts. That makes it worse. This is the day I have to make the decision. Never before have I dreaded the thought of a posted envelope coming through the letterbox. I look at my watch. Ten minutes past seven. The postie will be here soon. I bury my head in my hands and start to weep.

I’ve read and re-read the Handbook a hundred times. Each time the horror of it fills me with fresh despair. This firm doesn’t bother with verbal and written warnings. It recognises human failings but will not tolerate all too human mistakes.

Each employee has their own archive box, as I’d suspected. Just knowing that is enough to keep us in line. There’s one significant difference in the contracts we’ve signed to those we deliver. By joining the company, by signing in blood an agreement to work for *him*, we’ve sold not just our souls

but our bodies as well. The Disciplinary Procedure goes into great detail about what can happen to the latter. It even gives examples.

O'Neil and Nigel had let me take the rest of the day off after showing the contents of certain archive boxes that had been kept off the Destruction List. A special bay is reserved for these boxes, the records of Adasantsat employees who dare to believe they can get away with disobeying the company. One last, new document is added to the individual's archive before being put to shelf for the last time. The final file that details how the employee died.

What methods were used, how much blood was spilled, and how long it took to die. A time measured in not hours or minutes, but days, weeks – sometimes even months. All in comprehensively detailed reports, accompanied by full colour photographs.

An archive of pain. After what I was shown from Jim Doyle's file I was in no fit state to work.

*Oh, there's so we can do to you, so much pain we can inflict. Knowing that death will not be a release but instead a doorway to even greater suffering it is no surprise that the agonised human body clings tenaciously to life. The Managing Director who tried to stop boxes going out to Aberdeen, in the vain hope that he would give those souls a chance to escape...it took him six weeks to die at the tender hands of our Personnel Manager. Edith Olgin has such a talent for these things.*

*Fortunate were we that a young storeman by the name of Peter Tyndall had just passed his probationary period with flying colours and was ready to take on the role.*

I guess Tyndall had been in the same position as me. He was offered the same deal as I'm being offered now. Take the job and the disciplinary will go no further. Refuse it and Personnel will come for you.

Put like that I guess I have no real choice. I guess I'll have to accept, take the job, and figure out a way of escaping later. Trouble with that is that it means some other poor bastard will see a tempting job offer, probably freshly redundant and desperate for a job...and my escape? Maybe something along the same lines of Tyndall's exit. And what happens after that only Legion – and the Other Party – know.

So, be careful with your job hunting. And read the Terms and Conditions of your Contract of Employment carefully. *Very* carefully. It's not just your life that you're signing away.