



# ARGLETON

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*Seidr Press – London*

*First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Seidr Press  
Second edition 2012*

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*Cover design by Thomas James.*



*To Kevin, thank you for your endless supply of patience,  
love and support.*

*To Dad, thank you for your endless supply of books,  
especially the one about the trilobites.*

## Argleton Fields

Do you know where we're going?" Charlie peered over the neatly trimmed hawthorn hedge into the field beyond. At its edge was a small pavilion, weatherboards and railings painted fresh white, beams and pillars in crisp black. Although the roof sagged a little, every decorative ridge tile was in place. Numbers painted in the small gable above the main door revealed it had been built in 1887.

"I have the precise co-ordinates of — well, you'll see! — plugged into my map," said Matt, brandishing his phone.

Thwack! came the unmistakable sound of cricket. The pitch was in play, men in cricket whites standing around in various states of relaxation. The bowler approached the wicket in a loping run, rolled his arm over and let go of the ball. Despite looking slightly harried, the batsman hit a four and a gentle cheer drifted through the air along with the scent of newly mown grass.

"Ah, there's nothing like cricket to prove that summer has finally come," Matt said, as they set off along the path that skirted the pitch. "You know anything about it?"

"A bit," said Charlie.

“Never really figured it out, myself. All I know is that the team with the score most like a telephone number wins.”

“Well, that does rather depend.” Charlie glanced at the outfield where a portly gentleman stumbled backwards, trying to make a catch. “If they don’t finish play, say because of bad light or rain, then the second team doesn’t get a fair go, so the result has to be calculated.”

“Why does the ref wear a lab coat?”

“Umpire. The guy in the white coat is an umpire.”

“OK, so why does the umpire wear a lab coat? He’s not going to break off play for a quicky dissection halfway through, is he?”

Their path led them northwards towards the pavilion. A small group of spectators lounged in folding chairs or on picnic blankets, enjoying their postprandial lull. Another lazy cheer went up. Matt headed over to the nearest onlooker, a pensioner with a Panama on his head and a glass of Pimms in his hand.

“Matt!” Charlie hissed, hanging back and reddening in sympathetic embarrassment, although Matt himself felt none.

“Who’s winning?” Matt stood by the man’s side as if they were old friends.

“Aughton, my boy, Aughton.”

“Good to see the home side doing well,” said Matt, remembering the road sign they had passed as they closed in

on their goal. “Who are you playing?”

“Haydock. Although injury has them at a disadvantage, our lads are doing a fine job today.”

Another thwack, another cheer. From the distance came the drone of a small plane carving great aerobatic slices out of the sky. The warm sun on his skin reminded Matt of the long summers of childhood, when six weeks stretched into an eternity. This three day weekend didn't compare.

“Well, good luck! I'm sure you'll prevail.”

“Why, thank you! That's very kind.”

Matt rejoined Charlie and they walked on. The match continued behind them, with cheers and gasps in seemingly equal proportion drifting by on the haze. As they neared the top of the field, the path opened out into a small, sparsely planted orchard. The trees seemed abandoned, their trunks rising up out of thick, wild grasses that hadn't seen a mower in many a year. Thick apple blossom promised a crop that would keep the local wasp population, and perhaps the occasional passing walker, well fed.

“We have to either get into this next field on the left,” Matt said, staring at the map on his phone, “or go north and then west.”

“What about that gap in the hedge up there?” Charlie pointed towards a fingerpost that in turn pointed towards a distinctly empty space. A narrow bridge led through the hedgerow and across a hidden stream. They clambered over



the stile and, in a few strides, were on the other side and wandering through well-cropped grass.

“Now that is one impressive cow,” said Matt, pausing in awe at a mass of black and white grazing in the middle of the field. He sniffed. “And impressively aromatic with it, I might add!”

“Erm,” said Charlie. “I’m not sure that’s...”

“Cows are docile, right? Just great big lumbering stomachs on legs.”

“Well, mostly, but that’s not a cow, Matt.”

“Of course it’s a cow. It’s not a fluffy little sheep, is it now?”

“No, I mean, it’s not a cow. It’s a bull.”

“It can’t be a bull, it doesn’t have any horns. Anyway, I’m sure it doesn’t mean us any harm.” Matt started off towards the beast, which looked up at the sound of his approach.

“Doesn’t mean us any harm?” Charlie hung back, watching Matt with apprehension. “Look at the size of it. It’s a good foot taller than us!”

“Nah, it’s just a big old softie.”

“I really don’t think this is a good idea, Matt. You don’t just barrel on up to a Friesian bull and get in its personal space.”

“Bulls don’t have ‘personal space’, Charlie.”

“I think you’ll find this one does.” Charlie scanned the hedge, looking for a way out. She began edging along

the field border, picking her way carefully through the hummocky grass, one eye on the bull and the other searching for cowpats.

The bœuf en hoof approached.

“Matt, let’s get out of here.”

“It’s just curious. I mean, at the end of the day, it’s a herbivore. It doesn’t eat human.”

The bull’s tail swished aimlessly as it stared at them. Matt couldn’t help staring back, although he also couldn’t help wondering if that wasn’t a very bad idea. Staring can be, after all, a sign of aggression, he thought. The bull’s stare did not appear to be born of the friendly curiosity Matt specialised in.

“I think we ought to run,” Charlie said.

“I think you’re right,” Matt finally admitted.

“On the count of three, head for that gap in the hedge, right? OK?”

“ThreeTwoOneGo!”

The pair lurched forward from their standing start and tried to sprint without turning an ankle. The bull watched for a second, then broke into a headlong run. They adjusted course, trying to give it a wider berth.

Shit, this bull runs fast, Matt wanted to say, but his laboured breathing left no room for witticisms. He focused on his escape route. There was a chance that they were going to make it, he thought, putting on an extra spurt. The

bull thundering behind him, he vaulted over the bars of the gate, surprising himself in the process. He hit the ground awkwardly on the other side, stumbling forward. Momentum rolled him over, but not entirely out of the way of an equally clumsy landing by Charlie. She tumbled headlong towards Matt, fetching up sprawled across his chest. A red flush raced up her neck and she pushed herself quickly on to her back.

The two lay panting, staring back at the Friesian monster that had pulled up short in front of the gate. It snorted, breathing hard, although not as hard as the puny humans that lay sprawled before it. One last grunt and it turned, lumbering away, disinterested in the creatures it had successfully chased off its land.

“Oh crikey,” Matt gasped. “That was close.”

“You really are an idiot sometimes!” Charlie said, catching her breath and watching the mountain of meat disappearing behind the hedge. “This had better be worth it!”

“Of course it’s worth it!” Matt sat up and fished in his pocket for his phone. He groaned.

“What’s up?”

“My phone. I must have dropped it when we ran.”

“Oh no! You’re not saying we have to go back in there, are you?”

Matt caught Charlie’s eye and grimaced. They hauled themselves to their feet and crept slowly towards the gate, bending low so as not to draw the attention of the Friesian.

“You climb over, I’ll keep look,” whispered Charlie. Matt shot her a dark look, but given that it was his phone that was lost, didn’t comment further. Instead he slowly clambered back over the gate, keeping his body close to the top bar and trying to be quiet. Charlie peered into the field from behind the hedge, searching for any sign that the bull was on the return.

Matt, crouching, scanned the grass in front of him for a telltale glint of shiny black. He inched back the way they had run, head down, trusting Charlie to be his lookout. With a rush of relief he spotted the phone, end up in the grass. He grabbed it and dashed back to the gate, gracelessly scrambling over in case trouble was coming up behind him.

“You got it?”

“Thankfully.” Matt stood up, happy to be on the safe side of the hedge again. “Right, let’s find this damn place!” He surveyed the view.

“What place? It’s a field.”

There was no denying it. Lush grass tickled their ankles. Ahead they saw one of Lancashire’s finest pastures, enclosed by hedges on all sides and, this time, delightfully empty of livestock.

“It’s not just a field, Charlie,” Matt smiled, his equanimity restored. “It’s the field.”

“The field? There’s nothing here.”

“Patience! We’re not quite there yet!” Matt held his

phone out in front of him, casting it slowly back and forth before getting a fix and moving carefully forward again.

Charlie trailed behind, muttering. "You're being ridiculous."

"No, I'm being precise. We need to be located at precisely... 53.54404, -2.912807. We will be standing on those exact co-ordinates in three..." He took a step. "Two..." He took another. "One!" He beamed, holding the phone proudly ahead for a moment before staring down at his feet.

"There's still nothing here!" Charlie squinted, looking around, searching for some indication of why they were there.

"This, Charlie, is Argleton: The town that defies explanation!"

"Argleton?"

Matt aimed his phone at the ground and took a photo of his feet.

"Argleton. It's a phantom town. A town that's listed on GeoMaps but which doesn't actually exist. GeoMaps have no idea how it got there. The company that originally supplied the data doesn't know either. They even said as much. 'I really can't explain why these anomalies get into our database,' they said. Right now, you and I are standing slap bang on an anomaly."

"I see," Charlie said, although there was nothing to see. On the far northern side, the roof of the village hall poked up

above the hedge. The hall belonged to Aughton, the nearby non-fantastical town. She could hear the grumble of the A59 to the northwest and, very faintly indeed, the cricket match that continued on the village pitch.

“You know, there are even businesses listed as being here in Argleton,” Matt continued, wrapped up in his own enthusiasm. “And that’s the weird thing. This isn’t just a single anomaly. It permeates GeoMaps. Must drive locals mad, having their shops and offices located in a field in a town that doesn’t—,” he paused, staring at his phone. “Good grief! There’s wifi!”

“What?” Charlie came up behind him and peered over his shoulder at the phone screen. “Maybe it’s from the village hall.” They both peered at the grey roof in the distance.

“They wouldn’t have a wifi signal this strong,” Matt disagreed. “Ha! The wags! The network ID is ‘notrealG’!” He laughed. “It’s an anagram, you see. The letters of Argleton also spell ‘not real G’, with the G meaning GeoMaps.”

“Can you connect?”

“It’s asking for a password. I wonder...”

Matt started to key in alternative anagrams for Argleton that had been listed in one of the news stories he’d read.

“Not large. No. Great Lon. No. Give me a hand here, Charlie. I’m rubbish at anagrams.”

“I’ll say. ‘Great lon’ doesn’t even mean anything.” Charlie drew out her own phone and connected to the mobile web,

searching for an anagram site. She soon started reading out options. "Great on L."

"And that means something? Anyway, no."

"Let no arg."

"No."

"Not le arg."

"Are you turning into a pirate, or what? Still, no."

"We're running out now. How about, Get on l'AR?"

"LAR? That sounds distinctly French. Not to mention nonsensical... Wait? Bingo!" The pair of them burst out laughing again as Matt's phone connected to the hotspot.

"This is cool," said Matt. "No one is going to believe that we are actually at Argleton, uploading a picture of the very spot via wifi called 'Not real G' with a password of 'Get on l'AR'. What do you think that means, anyway?"

"God knows," replied Charlie. She shifted closer to Matt, pretending to peer at his screen as he entered his message. The 'send' progress bar made no move. As they waited, Charlie wondered if Matt was as aware of her proximity as she was of his. She flushed and sharply stepped away. "Er," she said nervously. "Look! A red kite!" She pointed upwards into the blue sky.

"Who'd be flying a kite on a day with no wind?"

"Not that kind of kite, you daft git. It's a bird, and a rare one round here. Look, there it is!" She pointed.

Matt peered into the sky, the slow wifi connection

temporarily forgotten. A small dialogue box bounced into view on his phone screen:

> Download Argleton App?

“I can’t see it.”

“Damn! It’s flown in front of the sun now. Oh, no, there it is!” She nudged him in the ribs and pointed again. Matt re-adjusted his grip on his phone. His thumb brushed the touch sensitive screen, which flashed up a new message:

> Downloading.

“Oh yeah! I see it!”

> Download complete.

> Gathering user data.

> User data collected.

> Hibernating.

“Wow! We are really lucky to see a red kite round here. Anyway, is your upload done yet?”

Matt glanced at his phone, wondering if it had crashed. Just as he was about to restart it, the progress bar gave a sudden spurt.

“Yup! There we go!”



“Excellent! Now, the question is, how do we get back to the car without crossing paths with our new friend, Mr Bull?”

“No,” said Matt. “The question is, is there another Argleton?”

## GeoMaps

Oh, damn!”

“What’s up?” Charlie looked up from her laptop to assess the level of frustration on her flatmate’s face.

“I’m trying to compare GeoMaps and Free Map UK.” He made a sound of disgust and closed his laptop.

“Why?”

“I was searching the web last night and there are a bunch of places missing off GeoMaps. One guy in the States was complaining that his business shows up in some town 50 miles away. But no one has mentioned another phantom town. There has to be another, somewhere.”

“It’s just a copyright trap,” Charlie said. “A fake place to catch out people nicking the map and using it commercially without paying.”

“Then why didn’t GeoMaps know about it? Besides, they use street names for that, they don’t make up whole towns. But, anyway, the problem is that if you zoom in far enough to see the town names on GeoMaps, you lose track of where you are.” He sank deeper into the armchair.

“You’re not trying to do it by eye, are you?” asked

Charlie, horrified.

“How else am I going to do it?”

“What if the anomaly is in Free Map UK too?”

“It’s a totally different map,” Matt protested. “Made mainly by bike couriers and their GPS units.”

“Which doesn’t mean that someone hasn’t added Argleton in there too.”

“I suppose.”

“It’s not all bad,” said Charlie. She gestured towards the machine and Matt handed it over.

“GeoMaps URLs are hackable,” she explained as she flipped the laptop open and began working. “All we need to do is split the UK up into blocks, based on latitude and longitude, and we can automatically generate URLs that present the hybrid satellite photo/map page at the appropriate level of zoom. Feed those URLs into ManyHands and ask users to OK the page if the satellite photo shows the town that is labelled on the map, or flag it if there’s any sort of phantom or missing town. Easy!”

Matt beamed at her. She couldn’t help but smile broadly back.

“What’s ManyHands?” he asked.

“It’s a crowdsourcing site,” she replied. Her fingers carried on typing as she spoke, as if they were being worked by someone else. “You ask people to do small tasks that computers find difficult, like identifying if there’s a kitten in

the photo or naming a favourite vodka. Computers aren't good at visual recognition tasks and they don't have much of an opinion on vodka."

"So I have to set up an account, then, and..."

"It'll be easier if I do it. I've already got developer keys for the APIs we'll need. It won't take me long to code a little ManyHands app to pull all the data into one place. We can keep track of how many people have looked at how many blocks. I can even set it up so that it sends you email when someone says they've found something. Come and look."

She patted the sofa beside her and, when Matt sat as invited, she edged over a little bit so he could see the screen more clearly. She finished typing and hit the 'preview' button. The screen switched to a browser view with a square of map in the centre and buttons on the right.

"All the user has to do is glance at this image, then pick a button: Yes, I see a town label without a town; Yes, I see a town without a town label; or No, nothing interesting to report. I'll add some text at the top to explain the project in a bit more detail so people know what they are looking for and why."

"Do we really want people to know what we're doing? I mean, what if they just decide to go there and not tell us?"

"Is that likely?"

"Well, you have to admit that it's possible."

"I suppose."

“OK, why not just say that we’re...” he paused to think, running through and discarding ideas as they came to him. “Say that we’re doing a map verification test, checking for accuracy.”

“But why would we want to do that for a company we don’t work for?”

“Erm. Uh. Yeah. Well, look, can you pull in the same view from Free Map UK?”

“You mean, the same blocks, at the same level of zoom? Should be able to, yes.”

“Then we can display them side by side?”

“Yes, we can do that.”

“Great! Then we can say that we’re looking for discrepancies. If we actually find anything strange, we can feed it back into Free Map UK, so it’s not like it’s going to go to waste.”

“Hrm, that’ll give people more work to do, so it might put them off.”

“But maybe we’ll get more people to take part if we’re actually doing something vaguely useful.”

“Perhaps you’re right. I’ll see what I can do.”

“You’re a star!” said Matt, “And I owe you a pint. So, how many URLs are we going to have to generate?”

“At the right level of zoom? Lots.”

“How many lots?”

“Lots of lots.”

“This is going to take a while, isn’t it?”

## Found

For God's sake, will you stop doing that!" Charlie snapped. Matt looked guiltily up from his mobile phone to see a sea of staring faces.

"Sorry," he muttered, slipping his phone back into his pocket. "Just an ongoing, er, project. Need to monitor alerts."

His friends murmured understanding noises and conversation resumed. As soon as he could, Matt slipped away from the group and went outside, standing on the pub doorstep so he could check his email in peace. It had been several days and whilst plenty of people had decided to have a go, so far nothing had been found. A couple of false alarms had proven to be, on further examination, very small conurbations missed by Free Map UK but corroborated by other sources.

But at 9.43pm, an email had arrived in Matt's inbox. A glance at the subject line and his heart began to beat a little faster: "Phantom Town, Dorset".

He clicked. There had been other emails that had sounded promising, including one Hard To Find Farm, but that had turned out to be a real place.

He read the email. User Magma had located a town

called Ibemcester in Dorset. He or she had cross-checked not just with Free Map UK but with every other mapping service on the web, yet could not find a town listed with that name, either at that location or elsewhere. This was it. The real thing. Again.

Matt ran back into the pub, waving his phone at Charlie and their bemused friends.

“Strike two!” he said, his face painted with glee.

“Really?”

“What is it?” asked one of their friends.

“The second phantom town in GeoMaps. And it’s legit as far as I can see. But we need to check it out.”

“Where is it?”

“Somewhere in Dorset. Want to come with me, Charlie?”

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Subject: Friendly warning  
From: Thoeris <no-reply@nosspam.com>  
To: Ch4r1i3 <Ch4r1i3@geekmail.com>  
Content-Type: text/plain; charset=UTF-8  
-----

Dear Ch4r1i3,

I just saw your app on ManyHands. I KNOW what you're really trying to do. Please DON'T. It's too DANGEROUS. I don't want to go into detail, except to say that I have been there and TRUST ME, you don't want to go through what I've been through. Please, for your own sake, for your own safety, GIVE UP NOW.

Please take this friendly warning seriously, OTHERWISE THINGS WILL GO VERY BADLY INDEED.

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## Ibemcester

Charlie chewed her lip thoughtfully as they reached Dorchester, scanning the road signs intently as they pulled up to a roundabout.

“Second exit, onto the A35,” said Matt, reading from a print out of directions provided by GeoMaps. Charlie made a vaguely affirmative noise. They skirted the new town of Poundbury, an ‘urban extension’ to Dorchester that was based on traditional rather than post-War town planning ideals. Under normal circumstances, Charlie would have stopped off for a peek at this controversial development by her slightly mad royal namesake, but she barely even thought about it.

“A354,” Matt said at the next roundabout. He pointed at the third exit and Charlie grunted again.

“Are you OK?” Matt asked.

“Yeah, fine.”

“It’s just you’ve barely said a thing since we got in the car four and a half hours ago.”

“I’m fine, really. Just a bit tired is all.”

“Are you sure?”

“I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Ah. Sorry to hear that. You know I’d offer to drive if I could.”

“You never learnt to drive?”

“Well, yes, technically. But, well, I’m not very good at it.”

Charlie smiled. She’d never worried that much about driving, but then, she had well-developed depth perception, speed sense, and hand-eye coordination. She put it down to misspending her youth playing computer games. Her shoulders relaxed a little as she drove through the countryside. Undulating fields on both sides of the road gave her a sense of liberation. Eventually the countryside began to turn into the outskirts of Weymouth.

“OK, we need to turn right up here, by a golf course,” said Matt. “Then it’s back roads through a housing estate, if the satellite picture is anything to go by.”

Modern houses gave way to fields briefly, before they came upon a much older village. A grey limestone wall, crenellations giving it a manorial air, ran by the side of the road. A perfectly trimmed grass verge ran at its foot.

“You want to take a right now, onto Camp Road,” Matt said, peering at his map. Ahead stood an impressive fifteenth century church, its bell tower presiding proudly over the parish. Soon the houses began to peter out. A beautifully kept white bungalow signalled the edge of town as the road narrowed and the sea hove into view.

They passed a caravan site on their left and Charlie glimpsed a family with bright plastic buckets and spades, and tiny nets on long bamboo poles ready for scooping fish out of pools. The road dipped down into a small valley before heading onwards towards the blue band across the horizon.

“That’s odd,” said Matt. “Look at all that barbed wire.”

On their right, low white utilitarian buildings lurked behind a razorwire-topped six-foot fence. A green-roofed Nissen hut, which looked like it had been thrown up in a hurry during the Second World War, sat squat next to locked gates.

“I wonder what that’s all about,” Charlie said. “Zombie sheep, perhaps?”

A horse in the field beyond the compound galloped alongside the fence, perhaps expecting to be fed. On each side of the road stood white and red striped gates, pinned back for now, but ready to swing closed when required.

“Danger. Large Vehicles Turning.” Matt read the sign as they passed.

“I’m not sure we should be driving down here.” Charlie slowed the car right down.

“I’m sure it’s fine. I mean, if we weren’t allowed, they’d shut the gates, right?”

“I wonder who ‘they’ are.”

Another sign gave them at least a partial answer: Wyke Regis Training Headquarters.

“Looks like the Army,” Matt said.

“We ought to go back.”

“Why?”

“I just have a bad feeling about this. I...” she hesitated. More six-foot fences topped with tangles of razorwire loomed on their right, then a small manned gatehouse set back from the kerbside. “We really shouldn’t be here.”

“Look,” Matt said as they crested the small hill. “There’s a fingerpost, which means a public right of way. And dog walkers.” A few cars were parked up at the end of the road, where it was cut abruptly off by the camp’s perimeter fence.

Charlie snorted.

“Honestly, don’t worry,” Matt said. “The Army has to have training camps somewhere. And if there are dog walkers here, it’s all cool.”

“I’m not sure,” said Charlie, as she pulled up behind a large hatchback. As she turned the engine off, she made no move to get out of the car.

“What’s the matter?”

Charlie paused, staring at the dashboard.

“Come on,” Matt said. “I can see there’s something up.”

“It’s just that I got...” She thought back to the threatening email she’d received and wondered whether she would sound silly and skittish if she mentioned it. “I’ve just got a headache, that’s all.”

Matt looked up at the darkening sky. “Oh, you poor

thing. Well, I'd better get this done before it starts to rain. Why don't you stay here." He pulled his phone out and opened up his GeoMaps app. "I won't be very long."

"No, I'm fine. A bit of sea air will sort me out."

"It's not far, at least," he said. "Just in that field, actually."

They watched as a tall, slim, middle-aged woman opened up the back of her hatchback, the boot area caged off from the passenger compartment. A grey dog with a coat like steel wire jumped down, tail wagging, adoring eyes facing its mistress. Her own hair was as grey, as wiry, as wild as the dog's. They looked like two halves of the same werewolf.

"I guess there's a gate or a stile or something where that signpost is."

"I would imagine," Matt said as they watched the woman and her dog vanish through the hedge. Charlie locked up the car and they followed.

The road ahead of them veered off right, into the camp. Straight ahead, a path carried on down to a narrow, seaweed strewn strand. Beyond it, Matt could see the heaping mound of Chesil Beach, a 200 metre wide shingle storm beach which formed a sweeping curve from the Isle of Portland along the coast to West Bay. Between the mainland and the bulk of Chesil Beach lay trapped the Fleet, a long, narrow lagoon. Ripples fractured its surface, tiny brothers of the rollers that broke on Chesil's seaward face.

Five thousand years of storms pushing down the English

Channel had sorted Chesil's shingle neatly by size, like a meticulous littoral librarian. The beach was made of fist-sized pebbles by the Isle of Portland, grading smaller and smaller as it extended west. Legend had it that local smugglers and fishermen could tell where they were in the dead of night simply by reaching over the side of their boat and picking up a handful of stones.

Instead of carrying on down towards the Fleet, Matt and Charlie bore left and crossed the stile between road and field.

"It should be just over here," said Matt, consulting his phone.

"This is a bit easier than last time."

They walked through grass damp from earlier drizzle. They could hear the sound of waves breaking on the Channel side of Chesil Beach. Salt air filled their nostrils and Matt found himself thinking of childhood trips to the seaside.

"Shame it's not a better day for it," he said. "Be a nice place for a picnic."

"Except for the enormous Army base," Charlie reminded him.

"Except for that, yes. You know, this field bears a striking resemblance to the last one."

"Except that it's right by the sea and smells of rotting seaweed."

"Well, yes, except for that." Matt checked their position. "Right, we are ..."

Too busy looking at his phone, Matt didn't see the steely blur barrelling towards him until it was too late. Charlie screamed. The dog leapt up, planting its front paws firm in his chest. He staggered backwards, trying hard not to go down. The dog was bigger close up than it had looked in the back of the car and it barked loudly. He couldn't tell if it was being overly friendly or getting ready to rip his face off. He tried to push it away, but it had the weight advantage.

"Matt!" Charlie shouted, unsure quite what to do. She thought for a second, then said, "Go left!"

Matt looked puzzled for a moment, then saw Charlie kick out, her foot connecting with the dog's ribs, pushing it off balance to his right. He dodged back and left, as the dog wobbled sideways and fell back onto all fours. It barked and set back on its haunches as if ready to spring. Matt stared at it.

Running probably wasn't an option, he thought. A dog that big could catch him in no time and would make short work of his ankles.

"Go home!" Charlie yelled. "Go home, dog! Go on! Get out of it!" She raised her arms up and leapt about, trying to look big and scary. The dog shrank back. "Get! Go on! Go home!"

Matt took the cue and did the same, shouting and waving his arms about. The dog began to curl its lip in a snarl. Matt wasn't entirely sure who was most shocked, him or the dog,

when Charlie belted it round the muzzle with her backpack. The dog yelped and ran off, tail tucked tight between its legs.

“Christ, I hope it’s OK!” Matt said.

“It will be,” said Charlie. “There’s nothing heavy in this bag. But seriously, I’d rather hurt the dog than see you bitten. That could have been really bad.” She was flushed, the feeling of fear still surging through her veins.

Matt took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He looked for the dog but it had slipped into the next field. He thought for a moment he glimpsed a grey head behind the hedgerow and thought of the hatchback earlier.

“Are you OK?” Charlie reached out to touch his arm, but drew back before she made contact.

“I’m fine. We don’t have much luck with livestock, do we?” said Matt, regaining his composure.

“That’s putting it mildly. I can’t believe that dog just went for you, though.”

“Yeah! Still, we survived. Now let’s get what we came for.”

Charlie laughed at his single-mindedness, but she admired it too.

“Where’s the spot?”

Matt checked his phone again and took a few steps. “Here. Time for a picture?”

“Of your feet again?”

“Of course. We may be the only people to have visited



two phantom towns!”

“Oh, stop the presses!”

The phone made a beeping sound.

“You are not going to believe this,” he said. “My wife sniffer says there’s a hotspot.”

“You are joking, right?”

They both looked around them. There was no village hall. No houses. Just visible on the other side of the road where they had parked was the fence that marked the Army base perimeter but, bar the tiny gatehouse, there were no buildings nearby.

“You’re telling me the ants have broadband?” said Charlie.

“Or the seagulls. The network ID is ‘Be mi secret’, with the ‘my’ spelt M-I. Cryptic.”

“Wait. What did you say this phantom town was called?”

“Ibemcester.”

“I think I smell an anagram again.” Charlie pulled out her own mobile and typed into a notepad app. “Yep,” she confirmed. “It is. Which means that the password is going to be an anagram again too.”

“Can you find me some options?”

Charlie focused on her phone for a while, then groaned.

“There are 230 potential answers.”

“Oh, dear God.”

Charlie looked up at the sky, at the grey clouds and dark-

ness looming in the west.

“It’s going to rain in a minute.”

“Good job the car’s not far away.”

Charlie grimaced and started reeling off possible anagrams.

“Scribe Meet.”

“No.”

“Ember Cities.”

“Poetic, but no.”

“Be mice rest.”

“Poor mice. No.”

“We got lucky in Argleton,” said Matt, half an hour later.

“We clearly did. Crib see met.”

“Nope. Is that drizzle I feel?”

“Yeah. Bite cremes. As in for mosquitoes, not kinky stuff with dairy products.”

“I could kill a creme egg right now. But still, no.”

“Re me bisect.”

“‘Re’ isn’t a word.”

“Yes it is, according to this site.”

“Oh! It is! We’re in! Right, time to upload.”

“I can’t believe we went through all that just to save you pennies on your data bill.”

“You know as well as I do that you can’t resist a good puzzle!”

Matt positioned himself squarely on the co-ordinates

and snapped a picture of his feet, semi-obscured by wet grass. He started the picture uploading.

“Do you think there’s something more going on?” asked Charlie.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there was wifi at Argleton. There’s wifi here. That doesn’t just happen by accident. Someone set it up. They must have had a reason.”

“It’s a geolocation game. A mate of mine ran one once. Some of us hid clues in our blogs and once you’d found and solved them all, you had a set of co-ordinates to plot on a map.”

“And what did the co-ordinates reveal?”

“The pins drew a giant penis in GeoMaps.”

“That was it?”

“He had a tight budget! Besides, it was more of a proof of concept. Anyway, that was a few years ago now, so someone was bound to do something more intricate. And this is obviously it.”

“I wouldn’t call this intricate as much as a bit bloody obscure, given that as far as I’m aware, no one else knows Ibemcester exists.”

“Oh dear,” Matt said, “that was a raindrop I felt just there.”

“Yeah. We’d better get going.”

“Dammit, this picture is still uploading.”

“It can’t be. It’s just not that big.”

“Slow as a wet weekend, this connection. Probably the router is hidden away in the hedge by the roadside.”

“Either that or it’s just below the surface here.”

Another large splat spread itself across Matt’s forehead. He glanced at the cloud in concern and muttered. His phone made a soft whooooooop noise and he thrust it in his pocket.

“Done!” he said, and the pair made a dash for the car, hoping to beat the rain.

## A late night

The rain was still hammering on the car roof when they arrived at the campsite. They sat silently for a moment.

“It is waterproof, isn’t it?”

“It’s a tent, of course it’s waterproof. That’s the point of tents,” Charlie said.

“We could just drive home.”

“I’ve driven for six hours already today,” Charlie protested. “It’s a long way from the south coast back up to Manchester.”

“It’s only eight o’clock. We could be home by three.”

“Or wrapped around a tree because I fell asleep at the wheel.”

“Good point.”

They surveyed the camping site. The ground sloped gently down to a small pond choked with duck weed. Large green mounds turned out to be ancient caravans so thickly coated in algae that they blended in with the landscape. A grotty toilet block at the end of the field was the only hint that the land had ever been deliberately given over to any type of human leisure activity. A holiday here would

certainly require more stoicism than one in the Algarve.

“How hard is the tent to put up?” Matt asked, noting a lighter pitter-patter as the rain eased.

“Piece of cake. If it dries up for ten minutes, we can get it done,” Charlie replied. They waited in silence for a while longer.

“Right! Now!” Charlie opened the door and dashed to the car boot, coat hood pulled up against the drizzle. She pulled out a tent and set to putting it up. Matt stood behind her, unsure how to help.

“Get the groundsheet,” Charlie said as she focused on putting the tent poles together. Matt ferreted about in the boot for so long Charlie lost patience and found it herself. “You really meant it when you said you’d never camped before, didn’t you?” she said.

“Duh,” came the reply.

With the tent up, Charlie began to transfer sleeping mats and bags, a worried glance at the sky hastening her work.

“Quick! Get in, before it starts raining again.”

As they zipped up the tent flaps, the rain returned, beating on the fly sheet like a hundred bored pixies drubbing their fingers on a desk.

“That was close!”

“Can you blow up this mat?”

“When they described this as a ‘two man tent’, they must have had two very small men in mind.”

Charlie took a second look. It was very cosy. She blushed in the darkness. “I normally camp on my own.”

They settled into their sleeping bags and listened to the rain. Matt laid still, willing himself to sleep. The night was warm enough that he felt quite comfortable and the sound of rain was almost soothing, a random white noise of splits and splats. Despite his expectations of a long and boring night, and despite the early hour, he quickly drifted off to sleep.

Charlie lay awake, acutely aware that she was jammed in a one-and-a-half-dwarf tent in the middle of the Dorset countryside in the pouring rain with... She tried not to think about it and attempted to settle down instead. It was hard to turn over in this sleeping bag at the best of times, but her efforts to not touch either the side of the tent or Matt resulted in an awkward series of little shuffles, like a horizontal three point turn. Eventually she got comfortable, or as near to comfortable as was possible given the circumstances, and let her mind unspool. Sleep came gradually but inexorably.

## §

Matt wasn't quite sure what made him wake in the small hours. It was still raining, but no more than earlier. He lay still, trying to get back to sleep, but instead his head began to buzz. Anagrams. It seemed to be all about anagrams. Argle-

ton: Not real G; Get on l'AR. Ibemcester: Be mi secret; Re me bisect.

What did it mean?

Well bisecting is to split something into two. It is something you can do to a line, a shape or an angle, he thought. Right now, they had a straight line between Argleton and Ibemcester. Did this mean there was a third phantom town somewhere between here and there? Was that the end of the puzzle? His eyes snapped open and he reached for his phone. The screen lit the tent up with a weak, bluish glow as he fumbled to get his email loaded.

The mobile data connection was slow and he tried not to huff as he waited for his mail application to start downloading messages, but the progress bar stayed resolutely still. The screensaver flicked the screen to black. He jabbed a finger at the phone to wake it up but his mail had made no progress at all.

A thunder clap startled him, the lightning illuminating the tent.

“What the crap?” said Charlie, dazed but awake.

“Erm ...” Matt stared at his phone, eyes confused by the brief bright light. Another lightning flash strobed across the sky, longer than the first.

“Oh shit,” said Charlie. “We’re leaking.”

“What?” Matt played the light from his phone screen around the tent and saw a drip of water run slowly down a



seam, plop onto Charlie's sleeping bag and disperse through the fabric in an instant. Another drip followed.

"Crap," Charlie said, jerking her feet to take the sleeping bag out of range. "These are goose down. If they get wet, they're ruined."

Another lightning flash lit the tent, thunder hot on its heels. The storm was overhead. A gust of wind buffeted the fly sheet, pushing it against the inner tent. Water seeped easily through the fabric where it touched. The wind rose. The rain fell like stair rods.

"Oh, this is so not good," said Charlie as water began to stream through the tent fabric. "Not good at all. We'd better shift to the car. This isn't going to end well if we just sit here."

Matt looked around in the dim glow of his phone's screen.

"Where's your laptop?" Charlie asked.

"In the car."

"Well, that's one less thing to worry about, I suppose," she said as she struggled to extricate herself from the sleeping bag and put her shoes on. They got jumpers and coats on as quickly as they could in the cramped space, whilst trying to keep the sleeping bags out of the growing puddle of water collecting at the foot of the tent. Charlie quickly stuffed the bags into their carry sacks and Matt gathered the rest of their things into the holdall.

"Right, ready to make a dash for it?"

The car was parked right next to the tent, but they still got wet ferrying their stuff to safety. Charlie toyed with the idea of taking the tent down in the rain, but it was already soaked through and there seemed no point in her getting colder and wetter.

Finally they were both seated in the car, gear stowed on the back seat.

“Jeeze,” Matt said, looking at his watch. “2am. Great.”

“Well, at least these seats recline quite a bit.”

“Yeah,” Matt twisted the knob at the side of his seat. “Still not the comfiest place to sleep.”

“Comfier than a wet sleeping bag.”

“Talking of wet.” Matt wriggled in his seat, stripping off his wet jacket, trainers and socks. For a moment, he considered taking off his damp trousers but, despite the fact it was dark, decided against it. He rummaged in the bags on the back seat and pulled forth a feather-filled sack. More wriggling and he had it draped over himself.

“Smart move,” Charlie said, doing the same.

After a period of rustling and shuffling, the car fell quiet, except for the thrum of rain and the rumble of thunder as the storm moved off. Matt fidgeted.

“You know,” he said. “There must be a third phantom town.”

“Why?”

“Think of the wifi password, ‘re me bisect’. You can’t

bisect a point, but you can bisect a line. And we have a line: between Argleton and Ibemcester. There has to be a third point somewhere in between.”

“In the middle, if they’ve used the term bisect in a geometrically accurate manner.” Charlie contemplated the problem. “Maybe it’s just a coincidence”, she finally said. “Why would someone go to all that trouble?”

“That’s exactly what I mean! Why set up wifi hotspots in the middle of two fields? Why then make the SSIDs and the passwords anagrams of the phantom town names? They clearly wanted to be found.”

“Maybe they’re just jerking your chain.”

Inside the tent, water continued to pool. The fly sheet was plastered to the inner tent and the rain came through without resistance. A wrinkle in the groundsheet that had held the flood back was overtopped and a tiny surge of water ran along the side of the tent.

Tucked in against the tent wall, lost in the hurry to evacuate, Matt’s phone lay helpless against the oncoming tide. Water seeped in through the dock connector and around the sleek phone’s few buttons. It filled the casing, shorting out the battery and the logic board that housed the processor chip and memory. Silently, without even a fizzle, the phone died.

## An unexpected expected delivery

I can't believe how fast they reacted," said Matt as he sat down with the box that contained his new phone.

"You're just lucky that your insurance covers acts of gross idiocy," Charlie said, poking him in the ribs.

"Well, that is what I pay them for. I've had too many phones break, conk out or just disappear." He slit the tape with a kitchen knife and opened up the packaging. Inside was a super slick box held closed by a black sleeve, its silk finish smooth to the touch. He slid the sleeve off and flipped the inner box open to reveal his new phone. "Wow, this has got to be the new model." He picked it up and turned it over in his hands, appreciating the stylish design.

"You mean, they just upgraded you?"

"So it would seem. Look!" He turned it on, the battery being pre-charged. "That's fast! You know, I didn't think these had even hit the shops yet."

"Maybe there's been a mix up."

"Well, no, look at the letter." He examined the paperwork. "It's got my name on it."

"No point looking a gift horse in the mouth, then!"

“Too right! This is great. Look at the screen, so much sharper than my old one. I better go restore my dead phone’s back-up. I just hope none of my old apps break.”

-----  
Subject: Your life is in danger  
From: Thoeris <no-reply@nospam.com>  
To: Ch4r1i3 <Ch4r1i3@geekmail.com>  
Content-Type: text/plain; charset=UTF-8  
-----

Ch4r1i3,

I've tried to be NICE. I gave you a FRIENDLY WARNING and you didn't listen. So let me be blunt. IF YOU DON'T BACK OFF, YOU WILL DIE.

I know where you live, I know what you do, I know everything about you. STOP. Your life, and the lives of those around you, is in MORTAL DANGER.

THIS IS NOT A JOKE.

-----

## Thir ds

H m,” Charlie murmured as soon as Matt entered the living room. She looked up from the dining table, her face reflecting concern.

“What’s up?” Matt took the seat next to her and she quickly minimised her email application out of sight.

“I’m just thinking that it’s time I hardened both our laptops. I’ve been wanting to make sure your security was up-to-date anyway. Now is as good a time as any to do a number on both our machines.”

“Who would try to hack us?”

Before Charlie could reply, the doorbell rang. Matt bounced up to answer it.

“Delivery for a Mr... Matthew Ingleston?” a man in a smart blue uniform said.

“What is it?”

The man looked at his paperwork.

“It’s from... Handy Mobile.”

“Weird. I already got my new phone. It came yesterday.”

The man looked puzzled. “Well, do you want it or not?”

“I’ve already got it.”

“Yeah, but do you want this one? I mean, if they’ve made a mistake, you can always send it back later.”

“I suppose.” Matt signed for the package and returned to the lounge.

“Hey, Charlie, want a new phone? For some reason, I’ve got two.” Matt flopped on the sofa and opened the new package. He read through the paperwork, which looked identical to the papers he had already received. He turned the box over in his hands, noting that this phone was the same model as his old one. Perhaps the upgrade had been a mistake. Well, if they called him, he’d hand it back, he thought, but it was just far too nice a phone to give up voluntarily. “So,” he said, putting the box to one side. “Where did we get to?”

“I was just going to say, ManyHands hasn’t turned up anything new.”

“Are we looking in the right place?”

“The clue was ‘bisect me’ so we’re bisecting the line between Argleton and Ibemcester.”

“That shouldn’t take too long?”

“No, it shouldn’t. So the fact that we haven’t hit pay dirt leads me to believe that we might need to look elsewhere. I suspect that ‘bisect’ refers not to a line, but to an angle.”

“An angle?”

“Yes. If there are three points on the map, that would describe a triangle. We would then have to bisect one of the vertices of that triangle. So, what we need to do is find the



third vertex.”

Charlie beckoned Matt over to look at her laptop. She typed ‘Argleton’ into the search bar of GeoMaps.

“This is Argleton, top left of England, roughly speaking.” She typed in Ibemcester and a second pin sprang into view. “This is Ibemcester. See how it’s right on the Dorset coast. You couldn’t get much further away from Argleton if you’d tried.” She gestured to the eastern coast of the UK. “And there’s plenty of room over here for a third point on dry land to make a triangle.”

“Not that a triangle is hugely exciting, as shapes go.”

“True, but perhaps this is another proof of concept.”

Matt scrutinised the map a little more closely. “So, let’s assume that if you’re going to draw a triangle you want to draw something that really does look triangular. A fat little triangle. That’s going to put the third point somewhere over here, in ... what’s that? Suffolk?”

“I reckon so.”

“Let’s see what ManyHands thinks.”

## Break-in

Whoops!” Charlie giggled as she staggered into Matt. “I gotcha,” he said as he caught her. “You’re a wee bit tipsy, Charlie-girl.”

“Noooo,” she slurred. “No, not at all. Nooooooooooo.”

“I think you are! Don’t worry, I’ll get you home.”

“Was a good night though, no?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I like mosquitos ... no, mogeetos!”

“Mojito, Charlie. Mojito.”

“I like mojitos!”

“You and Ernest Hemingway.”

“I’ve never had rum before.”

“I can tell. Here we are.” They stood at their garden gate, looking past the scruffy lawn towards the front door. “Did we lock up when we left?”

“Yeah, course we did. Deadlocked it.”

“Then what’s the door doing open?”

“Oh, shit.” Charlie didn’t feel so much like exaggerating her tipsiness anymore. She felt Matt’s hands fall away from her waist as he slowly edged towards the front door. “Matt!”

she whispered. He looked round at her.

“Stay there!” he whispered in return.

“Don’t be stupid!”

“If the door’s open, they’ve likely gone.”

Charlie crept up behind him, the two of them listening carefully for sounds of a break-in in progress. Matt flattened himself against the wall on one side of the front door, slowly pushed it open and peered inside. The door to the lounge was open and he could just make out the mess of their belongings thrown on the floor. He looked around the front garden for some sort of weapon, something to defend himself with. There was nothing, not even a stick. He looked at Charlie and gestured that he was going to go inside.

“Don’t! Let’s just call the police!”

“It’ll take them hours to get here. I’m not standing around out here whilst they fanny about arresting speeding drivers instead of solving proper crimes!”

“Well, let me go first, then.”

“Are you crazy?”

“If they see a girl first, they’re less likely to be aggressive.”

“No! These aren’t gentlemen scoundrels, they’re burglars. You are not going first.” Matt stepped in through the doorway to make his point. In the back of the house he heard footsteps, then the slam of the back door.

“They’ve gone out the back!” he said.

“They’ll be over the fence and away in no time.” Charlie

pulled her phone from her pocket and dialled 999. “Police please,” she said, heart thumping as much from the nervousness she felt calling the emergency services as from the break-in they’d nearly interrupted.

Matt crept down the hallway, cautiously peering into the lounge through the crack between the door and doorjamb. The room was empty. He paused, listening to hear if anyone else was in the flat. There was nothing. He looked back and saw Charlie still on the phone to the police dispatcher. Propped up in the corner of the hallway was a large golfing umbrella. He grabbed it. Not the most prepossessing of weapons, he thought, but it would have to do.

“They’re sending someone now,” Charlie said from behind him. He lurched, surprised by her voice so close. “Sorry, didn’t mean to make you jump.”

“That’s OK. I think they’ve gone.”

“Yeah, well, don’t touch anything, eh?”

They relaxed a little, certain now that the flat was empty. For the first time, they actually looked around them. The place had been completely turned over. The kitchen had got off lightly but the lounge was a mess. Books, papers and cushions were strewn around the floor. Charlie went straight to her rucksack, which sat propped up next to the sofa.

“It’s gone,” she said, flatly.

“Gone?”

“My laptop. It was in my bag. It’s gone.”

“Oh shit.”

“What about yours?”

“Ah, it was in my room.” The pair went through into his bedroom, which was in a similar state. Matt saw at a glance that his laptop had also been taken. It usually sat on a stand on his desk. Now all that was left was a tangle of forlorn cables, draped over the desk like a life support machine with no life to support. He sagged. “Crap.”

The tears came upon Charlie suddenly. Just as suddenly, Matt had pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly, letting her cry. He stroked her hair.

“It’ll be OK,” he said. “We’ll get new ones. And we’re all backed up because you’re smart and you make me do that sort of thing.” He could feel her tears soaking through his shirt.

“It’s just... they were in here!” she sobbed.

“I know. It’s horrible. But we’re lucky we didn’t surprise them in the act. It could have been a lot worse, Charlie. We’re OK. And they are only computers.”

“Bastards won’t get anything out of them though. They are uncrackable. Unless they have the passwords, they won’t be able to use them. They’re useless paperweights now.”

Matt didn’t say anything, just held her tightly whilst she calmed down. Together, they waited for the police to show up.

## Internet cafe

A cold hot chocolate sat congealing next to Charlie as she tapped away at a clunky old keyboard. The beverage had been of a similar vintage to the computer she was using: way past its sell-by date. But this was the closest internet cafe to home, so they had braved its school classroom decor in order to get online.

“Have you got our case number there?” Matt asked, filling in a claim form online. Charlie passed him a scrap of paper and scrubbed at her face with her palms.

“God, this is depressing.”

“We still need to think of ourselves as lucky. We weren’t hurt, and although it’s inconvenient, laptops are just laptops. Our data is safe, thanks to you. You were a bit prescient with the back-ups and security updates!”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

The pair lapsed into silence again as they continued picking up the pieces of the previous night’s break-in. Forms and emails and notifications and changing passwords just in case.

“Oh no,” Charlie said, her hand covering her open

mouth.

“What is it?”

“Another email.”

“What do you mean, ‘another email?’”

-----  
Subject:            You didn't listen  
From:                Thoeris <no-reply@nospam.com>  
To:                    Ch4r1i3 <Ch4r1i3@geekmail.com>  
Content-Type: text/plain; charset=UTF-8  
-----

You didn't LISTEN, did you? Well, perhaps last night will serve as a WARNING you'll take SERIOUSLY now.

STOP SEARCHING.

You'll never find it, but if you do, it'll be the LAST THING YOU EVER DO.

-----  
Matt sat quietly as he read the message on her screen.

“You said ‘another’. How many of these have you had?”

“This is the third.”

“Can I read the others?”

“It was them,” Charlie said after Matt had finished reading. “These people sending me these emails, they were the ones who broke into our flat. How else would they know?”

“We don’t know that,” he said, calmly, his mind racing to find a plausible explanation. “We’ve been pretty open with the fact that we got burgled last night. We’ve told people publicly what happened, so it wouldn’t be hard for anyone following you online to know we’ve been turned over. It doesn’t mean that they had anything to do with anything.”

“But, Matt, this is an email address I hardly ever use. They must have dug around to find it.”

Matt read through the emails again, considering them carefully before finally reaching a conclusion.

“No normal person uses capslock so often, Charlie. This person, whoever he or she is, is a troll. And frankly, it’s more likely to be a he, someone who just sees a pretty avatar and decides to give the person behind it some shit. Don’t let him upset you.”

He reached over to put a reassuring hand on her arm, then noticed that tears were silently falling from her eyes, leaving wet trails down her cheeks.

“It’s OK, Charlie. It’s OK. You know how mean people can be to strangers online. That’s all it is.” He moved his chair closer and leant over to wipe a tear away. “Really, it’ll be fine.”



“I don’t know, Matt. I just don’t know. This is just wiggling me out. I think we should stay away from this, this ... thing, whatever it is. I’ve been trolled before, this is different. This is scary.”

## Journey to Fimden

A truly miserable day, Matt thought as he stared out at the soggy Suffolk countryside from the tiny local train that was taking him to his third phantom town. The rain sheeted down the window, each trail of rainwater reminding him of his argument with Charlie. In the years he'd known her, they'd never really had a full-on blazing row, but this one was definitely a classic of its type.

Matt had found the location of the third phantom town, Fimden, a couple of weeks after the burglary. Charlie's father had been hugely generous, lending them the money they needed to replace their computer gear. They'd get the money back from the insurance company eventually, but their doctoral research projects were effectively hamstrung without decent machines to work on. Matt had been delighted to find Fimden, but Charlie was far from happy.

"I really wish you'd just give this whole quest up," she had said.

"Why?"

"These people who have been emailing me, they are clearly dangerous."

“What people? I mean, really, some troll has it in his head to give some lass online a hard time, and you give him the pleasure of taking it seriously?”

“They broke into our flat and stole our laptops, Matt! How can you not take that seriously?”

“You have no proof of that! Don’t you think that if they had really taken our laptops, they would have mentioned something explicitly about it? Instead you have a vague email that could simply be based on your latest updates. There’s nothing of substance in those emails!”

“Are you actually this much of an idiot?”

“Well, I’m glad that we’re getting down to how you really feel about me.”

Charlie had turned her back on him at that point, seething with anger that she didn’t want him to see.

“Come on, Charlie,” he had said, his tone conciliatory. “There’s nothing dangerous about this. We’re just solving a puzzle online that someone has set up for a lark. At the end of it we’ll find out what it’s all about and we’ll have a laugh. And that’ll be that. Come on, we’ll go this weekend. It’ll be fun.”

“You just don’t get it, do you Matt? I’m not going to drive you to Suffolk. It’s too dangerous.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Yes! Yes, I do believe that! I’m sorry, Matt, but I’ve been online a lot longer than you. I know trolls, and this person is

not just a troll. They just don't fit the normal troll pattern of behaviour."

"So, on the basis of a few emails, you think we're in danger?"

"Yes."

"Can't you see how ridiculous that is?"

"No."

"Right, well, fine. I'll get there on my own."

Charlie had left the room and there had been a polite but chill atmosphere in the flat ever since.

Matt stared at the countryside as it dribbled past. The journey had not been a pleasant one, starting off absurdly early at Manchester Piccadilly. Thence on to Leeds, Peterborough and finally now, nearly seven hours later, arriving at Saxmundham. At least, he thought, it was dry inside the train.

He got to his feet, grabbed his small rucksack off the rack, put it on and made his way out of the carriage to the vestibule, ready to disembark when the train pulled in. He watched the final few fields trundle past, and wondered what sort of town Saxmundham would turn out to be.

There was an almighty bang. The train lurched violently to one side. The scream of tortured metal and the sound of shattering safety glass filled the air. Matt was flung against the carriage door. The train lurched again and he hit the floor. The grinding, screeching carriage slowed as it ploughed its

way to a halt, leaning precariously, but not falling over. For a moment there was a strange silence, as if everyone were taking a deep breath together. Then the screaming and crying began.

Matt checked himself over. His forehead was tender and when he felt it with his fingertips they came away bloody. He mopped at the blood with the cuff of his sleeve and felt grateful it wasn't a serious wound. His shoulder and hip hurt where he had landed on them. He had no doubt that when his bruises bloomed, they'd be multicoloured. Otherwise, all was in working order.

Some of the other passengers weren't so lucky. He forced the doors to the carriage open. At the other end of the carriage, a woman, white with shock, clutched at her dislocated shoulder. Half-way along, a young man lay on the floor, groaning, his leg grotesquely bent at the shin.

"Come on, mate," Matt said to him. "Let's get you out of here." He stooped to slip his hands under the man's arms. "I'm going to lift you up, put all your weight on your good leg."

"I can't," the man said.

"I don't think it's a good idea to stay here."

"Everyone stay calm and vacate the train in an orderly fashion," a loud voice rang through the carriage. The conductor, probably called a 'train services manager' now, Matt thought, came through the carriage, giving people instruc-

tions on how to get out.

“Can you give me a hand?” Matt asked.

“I have to check the other carriages,” the man replied. “Excuse me?” He called to a businessman who looked a little dazed, but uninjured. “Could you help here?”

“Sure,” he said, the demand for action giving him something to focus on. He made his way through the fallen bags and suitcases to help Matt carry the injured man off the train. Outside in the drizzle, they set him gently down on the grass by the tracks. The walking wounded gathered, checking each other over, pressing torn shirts to cuts and gashes to stop the blood, or crying with shock.

“Lucky escape, eh?” said the businessman.

“Yes. Yes. Very lucky.” Matt looked around. No one seemed to be too seriously injured and he felt a wave of relief. The train itself had come off the rails but had managed to stay mostly upright. “I wonder what happened.”

“Something on the tracks, maybe.”

Matt felt coldness run through him. Yes, certainly it would be found that the train had collided with something just big enough to derail it. A concrete block, perhaps. Something that could be shifted by someone determined to keep him away from Fimden. Someone who could track him, someone who knew where he was. He shivered.

“You OK, son? You look a bit pale.”

“Yeah. Fine, thanks.”

Matt edged away from the group. The train had been coming up to a level crossing when it derailed. Although the red and white barriers were down, there were no cars in sight. He glanced behind him. Everyone was far too involved with their own problem to be paying any attention to someone wandering off.

He walked away from the crash scene, ducking down the narrow road, soon out of view behind the trees that lined the tracks. He took his phone out of his pocket and turned it off. As soon as he was sure he was out of sight, he dug out his waterproofs and gloves. It was going to be a half hour walk to the phantom town. He hoped that the drizzle would ease off before he got there.

## Fimden

So this is Fimden,” Matt said to himself, wishing Charlie was there with him.

He looked at his mobile phone and hesitantly turned it on. Once it had booted, he turned the GPS off, feeling slightly silly and paranoid for doing so, and waited for the wifi finder to announce available networks to join.

It didn't. He wandered around a bit, aimlessly searching for signal. He tried to picture the satellite photo he'd studied the night before and looked for landmarks to help pinpoint the right spot, but it all looked so different on the ground. Reluctantly, he opened GeoMaps and turned on his GPS. The app sprang to life and zoomed in on his position, superimposing a blinking blue spot on the satellite photo. He trudged through the drizzle to the right co-ordinates.

Once he was positioned, he looked down at his feet to discover them planted squarely in a cowpat. He sighed. Charlie would have been laughing at him right now. More to the point, Charlie would have spotted it and warned him away from it.

His wifi sniffer picked up a signal, this one weaker than



the others. The SSID was Mid Fen. OK, he thought, bit of poetic licence there, given the Fens are a good 50 miles away. Now, what can I do with F-I-M-D-E-N?

He typed in 'Mend if'. The dialogue box on his screen vibrated side to side, as if shaking its virtual head in disagreement. Charlie would have had this one figured out in no time, he thought, as he tried to rearrange the letters in his head.

Dim fen. Another little shake.

Fend mi. 'Mi' isn't a word, but what the hell, they'd used it before, so it was worth a shot. It didn't work.

Find em? No.

Find me. A pause whilst the dialogue box considered things. He waited. A dribble of drizzle trailed down the side of his neck, inside his waterproof jacket. The British summer was yet again proving its mettle.

A small radio-signal icon popped up in the task bar of his phone. For the third — and maybe final? — time, he was connected via wifi whilst standing in the middle of a field. It was weird, he thought. Perhaps a little too meaningful, a little too blunt. 'Find me' was a challenge, a poke in the ribs, an almost irresistible tease.

He pointed his phone camera at his feet, took the photo and uploaded it. The signal was weak and it took ages, as it had before. He waited, eager to walk back to Saxmundham, find his guest house and get warm and dry.

His phone made its 'photo uploaded' noise and he turned it off. He felt disconnected himself now, the adrenaline that had flooded his system was wearing off. He wondered why he'd come in the first place. Why hadn't he listened to Charlie? Tomorrow he would go home, and that would be that. She'd had been right, he thought, as he thrust his phone into his pocket and set off through the soaking rain. This was all just getting too creepy.

§

Matt was glad to wake the next morning. Dinner had been fish and chips from the nearest takeaway, but the lack of a TV in his room and his decision not to turn his phone on had made for a long, tedious evening. The B&B had been nice enough, the owners warm and friendly, but he hadn't felt relaxed and had struggled to sleep.

Saxmundham's narrow roads were lined with a mish-mash of architectural styles. A old grey rose-covered cottage, almost clichéd in its quaintness, stood next to a by-numbers 80s housing development that felt soulless in its predictability. On any other day, the sunshine and flowers and low-rise buildings would have made an enjoyable change, but instead Matt found it claustrophobic and oppressive. There were few people around, for which Matt was grateful. He didn't want to be seen.

He walked up Station Approach, reaching the level crossing. The derailed train was gone and the station, where he should have alighted yesterday, was still closed. The railway lines were cordoned off as investigators searched for evidence further up the tracks. Matt looked the other way, eastward down the tracks where a car passed over another level crossing.

Across from the station was an old pub, The Railway, a red and yellow brick building now closed and unloved, its windows blocked with sheet steel. It looked like it would be more at home in an inner city slum than in this picturesque Suffolk town. A blackboard that had once proclaimed special ales or menus now pointed punters towards The Cooper's Dip further along the road.

The station's brick and off-white rendered frontage was forbiddingly silent. In the car park was a portable bus stop sign, with 'Rail Replacement Bus' written on it. Matt was ten minutes early for his train and hoped that the bus was scheduled to leave at the same time. He had a 22 minute wait at Ipswich for the Peterborough train and if he missed that, it would add at least an hour to an already long journey.

He tried not to look at the ticket agent who was sitting on a folding chair with his portable ticketing machine, tried not to look at the station, tried not to look guilty for absconding the scene of an accident. But he had nothing to add to the investigators' story. Nothing believable, anyway.

He desperately wanted to get his phone out, check his email, check his social networking sites, call Charlie. But he didn't dare. They were clearly using it to track his whereabouts and the risk was just too great. When I get back to Manchester, he thought, I'll go to one of those dodgy little mobile phone shops and buy a couple of unlocked, unregistered SIM cards. We've got old phones we're not using.

As he waited for the bus, he turned all the events so far over in his mind. He couldn't believe he'd been quite so stupid.

## Masquerade II

**T**hank God you're OK!" Charlie said as Matt arrived home. "I've been trying to call you all weekend. When I heard there'd been a rail accident, I didn't know if you'd been hurt or what!"

"I'm sorry," Matt said, contrite. "I just, well, it was just too weird, Charlie. I'm sorry I didn't listen to you before. You were right, this whole thing has turned into something creepy."

Charlie noticed the bruising and cut above Matt's eye. "You are OK, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." They walked into the lounge and Matt flopped onto the sofa. "It was strange. One second I was standing by the door, waiting for the train to pull into the station, and the next I'm on the floor and the train's sliding along the tracks making a godawful din."

"They said there were no fatalities."

"A few broken arms and legs, maybe a bit of concussion, from what I saw. But I didn't hang around to look, just ducked quietly out and got the hell away from there."

"But you still went to Fimden?"

“Yeah. Not quite sure why. I mean, man, if they’re going to be derailing trains to stop me, then going to Fimden was stupid.”

“Well, I’m glad you did.”

Matt looked up at Charlie, surprised. Then he noticed her smiling, beaming almost luminously. She began to pace the room.

“Why is it a good thing that I put myself in harm’s way?”

“Well, this is why I was so desperate to get hold of you.”

“Apart from to check on my general wellbeing, of course.”

Charlie laughed. “Yes, of course, apart from that. But while you were in self-imposed exile this weekend, there’s been a meme going round the internet about a locative treasure hunt based on... Wait for it... GeoMaps!”

“There is?”

“It’s called Masquerade II, after the book by Kit Williams. Williams buried a golden hare at Ampthill in Bedfordshire and put clues in a book of paintings.”

“And you’re saying that all this phantom town stuff is part of Masquerade II?”

“Yes! I’m really sorry, Matt. I totally let my paranoia about online privacy get the better of me. You were right all along.”

“I was?”

“Yes. Those threatening emails were just another team

trying to put us off the trail. You were right about them just watching our status updates and using them to scare me.”

Matt sat in silence for a moment.

“So who’s behind this Masquerade II?”

“Well, no one knows. Clues have been popping up in strange places, some of the weirder bulletin boards on the web. But get this: One of the clues that’s been doing the rounds is an anagram of Ibemcester. We are definitely on the right trail.”

“I don’t know, Charlie. This all feels a bit ... What about the derailment?”

“I know that must have been scary, but in all honesty, these things do happen sometimes.”

“I suppose. I bought us new SIMs ...” Matt fished in his pocket for the two SIM cards and held them up wanly.

“Come and look,” Charlie said, extending her hand. Matt took it and followed her into her bedroom. She stared at the wall for a moment, a sea of magnolia broken up by little islands of sticky notes, maps and diagrams. In the middle was a taped-together print out of a map of the UK with three dots labelled Argleton, Ibemcester and Fimden.

“You’ve been working hard this weekend.”

“Yep!” Charlie tried to rally Matt’s enthusiasm as he sat listlessly on the edge of the bed. “Let’s just look at the anagrams. First we have Argleton, SSID ‘Not real G’, password ‘Get on l’AR.”

“Which makes no sense,” Matt said.

“Well, I’ve been thinking what AR might stand for.”

“Argon. Doesn’t have the same effect as nitrous oxide as far as I’m aware, so not a useful drug of choice. Would effectively suffocate you though.”

“Come on, try harder.”

“AR. Arkansas. Pronounced Ark-in-saw, which just goes to prove that Americans can’t spell.”

“Try again.”

“Ar. Country suffix for Argentina. Unless this is a cunning plan to wrest sovereignty of the Falkland Islands from British hands — and it would have to be very cunning, given that we aren’t exactly in the diplomatic game — I doubt it’s that.”

“Argleton. There’s a clue in the name.”

“Well, you’ve clearly worked it out, so spill.”

“Argleton. ARG. Alternate Reality Game. AR. Alternate Reality. This is the first confirmation that this is a geolocation game. Next is Ibemcester. Re me bisect. You can bisect a line or you can bisect an angle. For the first you need two points, for the latter you need three. Three points would give you a triangle...”

“And if you bisect all the angles, you get the centre,” Matt finished.

“Not the centre. A centre. Specifically, the incentre. Triangles have four different centres, depending on what method you use to construct them. There’s the incentre, the



orthocentre, the circumcentre and the centroid. They are, potentially, all different, unless you have an equilateral triangle. Hell, they don't even necessarily fall inside the triangle itself."

Matt watched Charlie as she made her point. She looked animated, happy. She always was when she had a thorny problem to chew over, he thought.

"I take it you've figured out where the centre is?"

"Well, I was just going to start working on that when I heard your key in the lock." She sat at her desk. "Probably the easiest way to do this is to convert the latitude and longitude to northings and eastings."

"What?"

"Pretend that latitude and longitude are the X and Y axes of a grid. An easting is the eastward distance measured as an X co-ordinate, and the northing is the northward distance measured as a Y co-ordinate. Once we have the eastings and northings of each point, we do some simple maths and get the mean easting and northing, and that's our centre."

"It's that easy?"

"Well, I'll double check with a bit of basic Pythagorean maths, but yes. It's that easy."

"Maths seemed harder than this at school."

"It really does depend on the teacher."

Charlie tapped away at her keyboard, jotting notes with pen and paper and occasionally mumbling something to

herself.

Matt sat and watched. He'd never realised what lovely hair she had, brown curls tumbling down her back, chestnut highlights shining in the sunlight. He hadn't thought of her femininity before. She was always Charlie, the geek with the computer who regularly solved his computer problems without ever once complaining that he was taking her for granted. He had, he thought. And he had been deeply unfair to think of her only in terms of her computer skills, rather than who she was as a person. He felt ashamed.

"Here we are!" Charlie said, spinning round on her office chair. She was beaming again. She really did have a lovely smile.

"Where is it?"

"Drag that over here," she pointed at a stool by her dresser, "and we'll find out."

She pulled up GeoMaps in her browser and carefully typed in: 52.139943, -1.310759. A pin sprang up as the map re-centred itself.

"Appletree?"

"I've never heard of it." Charlie zoomed the map out to give her a better idea of the general location of the pin. "It's between Coventry and Milton Keynes. We can get there in, oh, two and a half hours?"

"You really think we should go?"

"Fimden. Find me. They want us to go," Charlie said,

emphatically. “If we’re going to win Masquerade II, we have to. We can’t find what’s there unless we do.”

“I’m still not sure.”

“Oh, come on. I don’t want to let those bastards get there first. They’ve been messing with our heads and I won’t let them win.”

## The Centre

The field was a field just like all the others. A tiny brook meandered along one side, giving it a wavy edge. Matt and Charlie stood in the middle, checking their position by GPS.

“This is it.” Matt held his phone up. On the map, the blue dot of his location sat directly on top of the pin he’d set before they’d left the house. “The dead centre of The Argleton Triangle.”

Charlie looked at the ground beneath their feet and saw nothing but, by now, very familiar grass.

“Well, if there’s something here, it’s well buried.”

“Should have brought a spade.”

“Yeah, perhaps we should have. Masquerade was the hunt for a golden hare pendant, buried in a hare-shaped ceramic container to protect it from metal detectorists.”

“They can’t seriously expect us to dig. Haven’t geo-games moved on since then?”

They looked around. The field was completely empty, except for them. No sheep. No cows. No horses. Not even any evidence of previous sheep or cows or horses.

“We’ve found three phantom towns, mapped them, found the centre, and now there’s nothing here,” Charlie said, trying to hide her disappointment.

Matt switched on his phone’s wifi sniffer and searched for a hotspot. “Maybe the thing we’re looking for isn’t physical. We didn’t find anything physical at the other places.”

“Is there wifi?”

Matt paused, waiting for the app to finish its scan. A message popped up on his screen:

> welcome to the Centre.

The phone went black for a moment, then showed a full-screen image of a field. Matt looked up at Charlie, confused.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I have no idea. This isn’t anything I’ve done.” He hit the home button on the phone, but nothing changed. On the screen, all he could see was grass. It shifted as he moved the phone.

“The camera’s on,” Charlie said, peering over his shoulder. “Look.” She pushed the phone down a little and Matt’s feet came into view.

“It’s not the camera app, though. There are no controls.” He held the phone up and the image panned on the screen as he swept it in an arc before him. Another pop-up appeared.

> Initialising.

As they watched, a wireframe began to build on the screen. Lines grew out of the ground, turned corners and joined together. Then, brick by brick, walls went up, windows formed, doors and tarmac beneath their feet. They both looked down at the grass, glanced at the screen and saw grey paving slabs with a hint of green behind them. The screen was a three dimensional architectural overlay on the pastoral scene behind it.

“This is bonkers,” Matt said.

“It’s an alternate reality,” said Charlie.

The world on the screen had filled in completely now, a semi-transparent layer revealing enough of the real world behind that they wouldn’t accidentally fall in the stream. In this alternate world they were standing in a wide, open piazza surrounded by two- and three-storey buildings. Some were all-glass, reflecting the sun in their floor-to-ceiling windows. Others were ornate limestone façades that would blend into any 16th century capital city. These stood between sleek metal frontings like something out of a 50s imagining of a 90s that never quite came to pass, with bulging pods perched on a smooth, narrow stalks.

Matt slowly turned around, riveted to the tiny screen in his hand, Charlie shuffled round with him, staring over his shoulder. There was a perfectly manicured pair of trees

framing steps up to a Georgian townhouse. A road leading to the north. A shop front with an awning shading a window that seemed unglazed. And a small, half-timbered building with an incongruously modern sign above the door which said Visitor Centre.

Matt started walking towards the building. As he walked through the field, so he walked through the simulation on his phone.

“This is amazing,” he said. “It responds to every movement in real time, no lag at all.”

“Bet its thrashing your poor phone’s processor. But it’s a bit strange how there are no people. It’s like a ghost town ... A ghost town built by a 3D animator who has only just discovered surface textures, that is.”

“Yeah, it is rather lacking thematic coherence.”

They reached the Visitor Centre and Matt stretched out a hand. In his phone, he saw it push the door open. They stepped through. Faintly, they heard the sound of a tinkling bell emanate from the phone’s speakers.

Matt did another 360 degree turn, revealing racks of leaflets, shelves of books, and displays of souvenirs. It was like any other visitor centre anywhere in the real world. When he reached his starting position, Matt was so surprised to see a man behind the counter that he dropped his phone.

Charlie laughed as Matt, embarrassed, picked up the handset and reoriented himself to face the man. A little taller

than Matt, the man had smooth black hair swept back into a ponytail, sharp cheekbones and pale green eyes that looked slightly out of place against the golden tan of his skin. He wore a tight-fitting t-shirt which covered a well-muscled torso. Matt couldn't see much below mid-chest and didn't really want to be caught dipping the phone downwards.

Somewhere in the back of his head, Matt remembered the not-quite-right avatars in 3D virtual worlds. This was a little slicker, but still not quite all there.

"Hi Matt!" the avatar said, a very real-sounding voice coming from the phone's speakers.

Matt started with surprise.

"What?"

"I'm glad you finally made it to the Centre."

"Did he just say your name?" asked Charlie, incredulous.

"Who are you?" asked Matt.

"Please," said the avatar, ignoring the question, "do take a look around the town. Who knows what you will find."

The figure on the screen picked up what looked like a phone from the counter, tapped something into it and said, "There. I think you'll find that useful."

Matt's phone screen flipped into a map view of the phantom town, their location a pulsating blue dot. The sound of a door closing was just audible from the phone speakers. They looked back up towards the counter to find themselves alone in the visitor centre.



“Wow,” said Charlie. “Someone put a lot of effort into this.”

“There has to be a set of webcams around here somewhere,” Matt said, his eyes seeking telltale signs of technology hidden in hedges or trees. “I bet they’re tracking our location and when we reach a certain point it triggers a particular sequence. Very clever!”

“Ah, so some of my geeking has rubbed off on you then,” Charlie laughed. “But, if this is Masquerade II, perhaps the golden hare is hidden somewhere in this visualisation?” Charlie suggested. “Wait, what’s the date?”

“Erm, 29th, I think.”

“Bah, not an equinox then. That was when the original clues to the hare’s whereabouts would point to its location precisely.”

“You think we have to come back next month?”

“No, that would be ridiculous, given the furore online.”

“Well, let’s just see what we can find.”

The pair spent a while wandering around the town, their only window into it a tiny phone screen. Occasionally, they glimpsed other avatars in the distance, but their paths never crossed. Matt at one point tried to walk through a wall and, whilst there was nothing physical to stop him, his phone screen went blank until he had backed out of the building.

“This isn’t going to get us anywhere,” Charlie said. “Think for a moment. We’re at the centre of an equilateral triangle,

so are there any triangles on the map that might help?”

Matt pulled up the map and they stared at it. It was devoid of roads at 60 degrees to each other, or any other obvious sign of triangleness.

“We started here,” Charlie said, pointing at the Visitor Centre in the bottom left of the screen. “What if that’s one apex?”

“Where’s the second? If it’s another equilateral triangle then we can work out the third when we know the second, but there’s nothing to tell us where the second is.”

They stared at the screen again, then Charlie took Matt’s hand and guided it to tilt the phone to one side.

“There!” she said. “If you look at those two crescent-shaped roads that are facing each other, if you take that to be a bisected edge, then the second point has to be about there, in this ... what is that? A park?”

“Which means the third apex must be about there-ish,” Matt pointed.

“So the centre is about here. Except that looks like it’s in the middle of a building of some sort.”

“Let’s go see!”

They set off through the 3D-scape, heading first along a narrow road before reaching what looked like a series of switchbacks that would normally be found going up a steep hill.

“Have you noticed that every step we take in the real

world is quite a bit bigger in this alternate reality?” Matt asked.

“Yes, I have. But then, this field isn’t exactly enormous.”

“I wish we’d been able to travel three steps for every one in the walk over here from the car.”

They slowly navigated their way around the alternate world, reluctant to just walk as-the-crow-flies to the centre. It seemed wrong to just charge through a reality that someone else had so carefully constructed. They walked through another piazza, this one with a beautiful fountain in the centre, arcs of water glinting in the sunshine. It was easy to forget that they were walking through two worlds, not just the virtual one.

Finally, they reached the area where they guessed the centre to be. The building occupying the spot was an octagonal colonnade of Ionic pillars. Holding the phone up, they could see a huge golden dome. Atop that was a golden hare.

“This has to be it,” Charlie said.

Matt started towards it, climbing the steps towards the pillars. He felt as if he were almost climbing in real life. He glanced down at his feet through the lens of the phone. Instead of seeing his trainers, in all their photorealistic glory, he saw an animated approximation of his trainers, as if they had become a part of this virtual world.

“Matt?” Charlie said, a concerned tint to her voice.

“What?” He didn’t look back, but instead stared up at

the man from the Visitor Centre who had emerged from inside the building. He took another step. He almost didn't need to look through the phone anymore. The vision was there, inside his head. He could see the ornate capitals on the pillars with their intricately carved volutes.

"Matt?" Charlie called again. There was something unnatural in the stiff way he was standing. "Hey!" He didn't respond. Charlie reached out towards him, to shake him into reaction.

"Charlie!" came a woman's yell. Charlie froze for a second, her arm outstretched, fingertips not an inch away from Matt's arm.

## §

Unaware of what was unfolding around him in the real world, Matt reached the last step in his alternate reality.

"Welcome to the Temple," the man said. Matt heard the voice somewhere in his head, as if it had bypassed his ears entirely. He reached out to Matt, inviting. Matt went to shake the man's hand and saw his arm in front of him, smooth and avatar-like.

"What is the Temple?" Matt asked, his own voice sounding strange, flattened, as if it had been put through an equaliser that stripped out all the highest and lowest frequencies. In comparison, the man's voice had sounded like someone

had set its EQ to Bass Booster.

“You will see,” the man said, as he clasped Matt’s hand. Matt felt the stranger’s fingers wrap around his, but the sensation was rooted deep in his brain rather than originating from his skin. It all felt so real, yet so unreal.

He stepped through the row of columns into the building itself and felt a lightness, almost a giddiness, as if he had stood up too fast. Somewhere in the distance he heard a familiar voice, but his brain was reluctant to listen, hearing just a noise that sounded bells of recognition but no comprehension.

He looked around the Temple, the sun streaming through the pillars, casting bold shadows on the limestone floor. For a moment, something felt wrong. He tried to look through the walls, searching for hints of green underneath, but there was nothing. He wondered why he had thought there should be.

## §

Charlie turned towards the strange voice in time to see a small, grey-haired woman hurtling towards her. Despite her size, the woman tackled Charlie like a seasoned rugby pro, flooring her. Winded, Charlie gasped for breath as she struggled to push the woman off, but her attacker was both younger and stronger than she at first looked. She pinned

Charlie to the ground by her shoulders.

“I told you! I warned you!” the woman said.

“Get off me!” Charlie shouted. She wriggled one arm free and shoved the woman in the chest.

“You didn’t listen, did you? Well, you should be glad that I was here to save you!”

“Save me from what?” gasped Charlie as she finally pushed the woman aside. They eyed each other warily.

“From them!” the woman hissed, her hand waving to encompass the entire world.

“What them? What are you talking about?”

“They’ll steal your mind if you let them, you stupid girl. Didn’t you realise you were in over your head?”

Charlie looked up at Matt, who stood statuesque. She leapt to her feet, grabbed him by the shoulders, and shook him hard. His eyes were glazed, unresponsive.

“What’s happened to him?” Charlie rounded on the woman. “What’s happened?”

## §

Matt took another step forward into his new reality. The phone in his hand, he saw, looked like his phone, but with crisper, sleeker lines. He went to put it away and, as his hand neared his hip, the phone seemed to just transfer itself automatically to his pocket. The benefits of nonphysicality, Matt

thought.

He looked at his arms, his legs, and noticed how much more detailed the textures were now than they had been on his phone. He gazed up at the domed ceiling above and saw a richness of colour that he had missed before. Glancing back outside he realised why they hadn't bumped into anyone on the ground: above him people were flying through the air, no jetpacks or personal gyrocopters needed, just the will to fly. He smiled.

"Welcome, Matt," said the man. "Let me show you how to customise yourself."

## §

Charlie shook him again. She half expected him to stay rigid and staring, but his body relaxed, almost collapsing. Charlie staggered under his deadweight, trying to let him down gently onto the grass. The grey-haired stranger watched impassively, her mouth agape.

"But it's you they're after," the woman mumbled. "You. You solved the puzzle. How could they..."

"Who they hell are 'they'?" Charlie checked Matt's breathing and pulse. He still had both, but his breath was shallow and his pulse weak. She rolled him over into the recovery position, then pulled her phone out and dialled 999. The stranger lunged for her handset, trying to bat it

away. “What are you doing?” Charlie shouted.

“It’s too late. He’ll be dead like the rest of them. Like my Edward.”

“He’s not dead!”

The emergency services operator answered and Charlie gave their position as best she could.

The woman backed away, staring horrified at Matt’s prone form.

“I warned you. I didn’t know you had someone else...”

“Who are you?” Charlie looked apprehensively at Matt, unsure if there was something else she should be doing, then back at her assailant.

“I’m Maggie. I...”

“Tell me what you know,” Charlie said, the shock distancing her from the situation. She felt cold and calm and rational and dislocated from the world.

“It’s too late. Too late. If you’d stopped when I told you, I would have had to... But you ignored me, you didn’t give me any choice. I had to stop you!”

“That was you?” Anger was starting to dispel the calm.

“You had to be taught a lesson!”

“You threatened us? Broke into our home? Derailed a train? God, you could have killed someone!”

“What? What train?”

“What happened to Matt?” Charlie demanded.

“It’s too late. He’s gone.”



The sound of the emergency helicopter approaching made the pair of them look up. Maggie threw Charlie a terrified look and fled.

Charlie stared after her for a moment, then turned to Matt, shielding him from the wind of the helicopter's landing, brushing his hair out of his face, stroking his cheek, hoping that it wasn't too late.

## Months later

Charlie sprang to her feet as she heard the sound of a key slipping into the front door and dashed to open it. Matt stood on the doorstep, pale and gaunt, but bright-eyed. Charlie didn't even bother calling out his name — she suspected that if she tried, it would come out sounding strangled — and just threw her arms around his neck. He embraced her in a hug that she wanted to last forever, and kissed her hair.

“You're back!” Charlie managed at last.

“Just about,” Matt said. He stepped into the flat, moving out of the way of his parents, who carried in his suitcase and bags.

“Hallo Charlie,” Mr Ingleston said. “Good to see you again!”

“Hallo Tom,” Charlie said. “Please, do come in!” She ushered them into the lounge, only reluctantly letting go of Matt in the process. “How are you feeling?” she asked him.

“Oh, I'm doing alright, I guess.”

“Can I get anyone a cup of tea?”

“Yes, yes, that'd be lovely!” Matt's mother replied.

“Well, why don’t you go and help Charlie with the tea,” his father said, “whilst I help get Matt unpacked?”

“Really, Dad, I don’t need a hand,” Matt protested.

“Yes, you do,” his father said, ushering him into his room whilst Charlie headed towards the kitchen, Mrs Ingleston in tow. As she shut the kitchen door behind her, Mrs Ingleston pulled out a folder from her handbag.

“How is he, really, Barbara?” Charlie asked.

“He’s improving, day by day, but he’s not the same person. You need to be prepared for a big difference, dear.”

“But he’s going to be OK?”

“Well, they can’t find anything physically wrong with him, but he is still having memory problems. We’re just grateful that he remembers anything at all, but you’ll have to get used to him having gaps.” She handed Charlie the folder. “These are contact details for his specialist, as well as all our numbers and his brother’s numbers, just in case anything goes awry. We don’t think it will, but call us any time you get worried, dear. More than anything, he just needs to get back to his old life. He was going stir crazy at home, trapped in our house in the middle of nowhere!”

They made tea and by the time they were back in the lounge, so were the men. The four of them made small talk until the teapot was empty. Charlie sat across the room from Matt, unable to either take her eyes off him or go over and hug him. She itched for his parents to leave, but was far too

polite to even drop a hint. They didn't stay long, though, and soon Charlie and Matt were standing again at the door, waving them off, arms surreptitiously around each other.

"In all seriousness, Matt," Charlie said as they went back to sit on the sofa together, "how are you feeling?"

"It's... It's hard to say, Charlie."

"You don't remember anything?"

"Nothing from a few days before until they brought me out of sedation."

"You don't remember the alternate reality app on your phone?"

"No."

"You don't remember the Visitor Centre or walking round the field looking for the golden hare?"

"Nothing. Where is my phone, by the way? Mum said you had it?"

"Yes, I do. Hang on." She went to the mantelpiece where the phone had sat untouched since she'd returned from the hospital. She looked at Matt reluctantly. "Do you think it's smart to turn it on? What if this phone is what caused your collapse?"

"How could a phone do that?"

"Good question, though I don't know how the hell they rigged that AR in the field either, but they did."

Matt recognised the concern in Charlie's voice and said, "You think we should trash it?"

“I don’t know. I hate the idea of ruining a perfectly good phone, but...”

“Maybe it was something in the field. I had that phone for ages before that and nothing bad happened.”

“That’s a good point. OK, I’m going to turn it on, but if anything looks weird, you grab it off me, right?” Charlie wasn’t sure this was a smart idea, but her curiosity had kicked in.

“Right.”

“Three... Two... One...” She pressed the On button and waited. The backlight of the screen came on, but the screen itself remained black. She took it back over to Matt and sat down next to him.

“It’s bricked.”

“Yeah. It looks like it has been wiped.” She turned the inert thing over in her hands. “Wonder how you do a factory reset.”

Matt took the phone from her hands, his fingers perhaps brushing hers a little more than they needed to, and inspected it. “Back in a moment,” he said, heading off to his room. He returned moments later with his laptop and the cable for the phone.

“Oh, that reminds me, I’ve got our laptops back.”

“Really? How the hell did that happen?”

“They were delivered by courier the week after you collapsed. Weird.”

“Did the police catch the thieves?”

“No, no, they didn’t. In fact, I haven’t heard anything more from them. But it doesn’t matter now we have our stuff back.”

“I suppose ... I never thought I’d say it, but I’ve missed having a laptop. Mum wouldn’t let me use one, said I needed to recuperate without addling my brain on the internet.”

“Well, the connection at your parents’ place is rubbish anyway, so it would only have driven you nuts with frustration.”

Matt laughed. He connected the phone to his computer and opened a c: prompt window. He paused a moment, his eyes unfocused, and started typing. Charlie sat close to him, watching the screen.

“Matt? What are you doing?” He was typing quite quickly, but once he was past standard log-in commands, Charlie couldn’t recognise any of the code he was executing on the phone. “Matt?” She shook his shoulder and he snapped out of his reverie.

“What? Sorry!”

Charlie lifted the laptop on to her own lap and scrolled back through log of commands and responses from the phone. Nothing looked familiar.

“Matt, what is this?”

“What is what?”

“This!” She pointed at the green text in the black

window.

“Erm, I don’t know.”

“But you were typing this.”

“Yeeaaaahhh. Yeah, I’m not quite sure, if I’m honest.”

“Matt, I’m doing a PhD in computer science. My thesis is on specialised and obscure programming languages. This is like nothing I’ve ever seen. Where did you learn it?”

“I don’t know, Charlie. I just, when I... When I woke up in hospital, it was like finding my way out of this infinite white maze. I’d been stuck in my own virtual reality in my own head for what felt like forever. When they brought me back to consciousness it was like someone just opened a door in that maze and let me out. Since then, I’ve been dying to get my hands on a computer, but Mum wouldn’t let me. And when I plugged that phone in, well, something in my head took over.” He looked up at her, caught her eye. “It was like I could see inside of it, Charlie. Like it was part of me and I could just make it do what I want.”

“What’s a regex?”

“A what? I have no idea.”

Charlie opened a text editor and typed. “Look at this and tell me if it’s right.”

Matt glanced at it and shook his head. He took the laptop back and made some corrections.

“How did you know what to correct, Matt? You’re crap at coding. You can barely program the TV recorder.”

“I don’t know, Charlie. It just didn’t look right.”

He flipped back to the Terminal window and looked at what he’d typed.

“Can you finish it?” Charlie asked.

Matt started typing again, his expression focused and concentrated. Suddenly, the phone chimed, the screen lighting up white. “Well, it’s not dead anymore,” Matt said, “But it doesn’t have an operating system. They wiped everything when it disconnected from the hotspot at The Centre.”

“You remember!”

Matt stopped, and looked at her. “I guess I remember that much, yes. And maybe there’s more buried somewhere. But this phone still won’t work without an operating system. I think I can write one, though.”

“Write one?”

“Yeah, given a bit of time, I think I can.”

“Holy crap, Matt.”

He looked up at her, surprised. “I suppose that is a little odd,” he said. “Yes, yes it is odd. They definitely did something to me.”

Charlie stared back at him, noting the lines in his face that hadn’t been there before, the shadows in his eyes, the skin taut over his cheekbones. He looked exhausted. She took the laptop and closed it.

“I think you need to take this in stages,” she said. “You’re not fully recovered yet, and right now, I think you need a



nap.”

“Maybe you’re right. It was a long drive over.”

“Come on, off to bed with you.” She stood, took his hand, and pulled as if to pull him to his feet. He laughed as he stood.

“OK, Charlie, OK. Just one thing, though.”

“What?”

“Will you come with me?”

## Acknowledgements

With massive thanks to everyone who helped to make this project such a success. Without the help and support of everyone involved, this work and my life would have been lesser.

Thanks to Kevin Charman-Anderson for invaluable discussions that shaped the story and helped me to understand Matt and Charlie a little better.

Thanks to the members of my editorial board for their feedback and essential moral support: Stephanie Booth, Sydney Padua, Kevin Marks, Stephanie Troeth, Vincent Holland-Keen, Steve Mosby and Owen Blacker.

The title page illustration was drawn by the fabulous Sydney Padua, whose comic, *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace & Baggage*, you can read at [2dgoggles.com](http://2dgoggles.com).

Thanks to Matt Patterson for being my Design Overlord and helping me to iron out considerable visual wrinkles. And thanks to Thomas James for designing the new cover and endpapers for the second edition.

And finally, very special thanks to my Kickstarter supporters, without whom this story would remain just

a collection of bits on my hard drive: Aaron Davies, Beth Dunn, Eric Wayne Norlander, Gary Turner, Irish Viking, Jason Lee, John Rochester, Kate Trgovac, Noirin Shirley, Stefan Schmiedl, Stephanie Booth, Steve Walker, steve mosby, Zach Greenberger, Alison B, Allan Jenkins, Dan Dickinson, David Miller, David Shane, DivNull Productions, Fred DeJarlais, Gavin Bell, Gia Milinovich, Iain Baker, Jessica Spengler, Karin H, Kathryn Service, Kevin Marks, Lucy Gunther, Matt Zimmerman, Michael Weiss, Mike Little, Paul J Dickinson, Pierre L'allier, Richard Kempter, Scott VanGerpen, Shedworking, Steph Troeth, Susan Ator, TScheffner, Vicki O'Shea, Adam Milner, Amanda Hepburn, Andrew Blake, Andy Markowitz , Andy Sturdevant, Belle, benmason, Bill Allen, Blair Frank, C Ferguson, Cathy Cooper, Christina Svendsen, Christy Dena, Cliff Fuller, David Clay, Delia Stearnes, Diane Brewster, Dmitry Kohmanyuk, Donia Conn, Gretchen Stelter, J. Moore, Jennifer DeMarrais, Jesse Bowline, Joe Milazzo, Joey Coleman, John Clark, Jon Wilkie, Keith Kunkel, Kevin Jackson, Kevin Makice, Lorin O'Brien, Melissa Anderson Sweazy, Mildred Kennedy-Stirling, nancy may, Nigel Shardlow, paul d mcnair, Perrin Randlette, Ralph Brandi, Rebecca, Stephen Weston, SusanWalther, vlaskovits, Wil Scott, Joel, Pixie359.

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