Hi-Tension

I sat in the project status meeting with three other people and thought back to a year ago of a project status meeting for the same product but an earlier version, and realized that I was the only person left from that other meeting. The three people then were the heads of Development, QA, and Project Management. The three people who sat with me now were the heads of Development, QA, and Project Management. Except for a different set of features and bugs, the discussion and the context were practically the same, except that all the individuals were different. That is, except for me. And then one day when I finally will no longer be here, all the individuals will be different, but the product will still be the same and the same meeting will take place. I started pondering this surreal observation, quickly shook my head, and decided that I'd better be paying attention to the meeting instead.

Each person reported on the progress, or lack of progress, of their teams – first the Development Manager, then the QA Manager, and finally me, the Documentation Manager. As we went around the room, the Project Manager asked each person questions about their team's tasks, and at one point a low intensity argument erupted between the Development Manager and the QA Manager about why hadn't Development reported to the QA team about the changes they had made to the user interface? And, on top of that, their bug-ridden design potentially will cause data corruption, harming the user's database. I dutifully wrote all of this down, trying to weed out the high-level points that I could understand from some of the more arcane and technical ones. The Development Manager saw what I was doing and gave me a dirty look, as if I had no business doing it.

When the QA Manager suddenly asked me to explain why there were so many documentation bugs opened on this product version, I sensed some type of set up and tried my best tempered and rehearsed response – being sure not to shirk any responsibility, but at the same time not letting the QA and Development teams think it was only my problem. I started having a gurgling sensation in my gut and a mild out-of-body experience. Is this why I'm here? a voice asked, to defend myself against grandstanding QA managers? Yes, I said back to the voice. And if you don't start paying attention again, Anne from QA is going to continue running roughshod over you, and Bill from Development is going to continue to think you and your team are a useless bunch of pains in the neck. And of course, your boss Tom, the Development VP, will get a report including a full set of such complaints from Bill. I summoned my standard talking points: we were all on the same team, and if only the Development team would communicate with us in a timely manner and at the same time as everyone else, we'd all be on the same page regarding the release progress, and QA wouldn't have to open all these bugs. I could see all the eyebrows mockingly rise ever so slightly. To them, it seemed, this was a lame excuse.

Katharine the Project Manager finally decided to end the sparring and said "Well, I think we can take this discussion offline. What's important is that we're all on the same page now and we're moving forward toward the release. So, Bill, what can we do to increase the closure rate of the bugs?" Bill started thinking out loud about how he might be able to move one resource from another project to this project, but then again he'd have to get the VP's approval on that, and he started again complaining that some of these bugs

that QA was opening were not real bugs. Katharine cut in and said "Well, Bill, perhaps talk to Tom and see if you can get some help moving the resources around. Maybe let's take this offline after you talk to him? And to all of you, I just want to remind you that both Tom and the CEO are really counting on this project going out on time. So maybe you can get some extra effort somehow from your team members?"

Extra effort, I repeated silently to myself. I'm lucky if half of my team puts in the regular effort. And the day that comes when someone cares about the actual quality of the documentation, as opposed to how many bugs we close, will indicate that the end of the world had arrived. Do I need to be lectured to by a Project Manager who only a few months ago was also a middle-level Development team leader?

The meeting was winding down and I wasn't paying much attention anymore, stuck in my cycle of thoughts and stewing in my anger. I shook my head again, as if rocking it back and forth could fling off the negative vibe. I looked up and saw that no one was looking at me, and I felt relieved that I was temporarily invisible. Anne suddenly made another general observation about the lack of focus on different teams, and I took it as an oblique critique. I shriveled further into myself. This is it, I convinced myself. They are going to talk to Tom, and I'm finished. I might as well start looking seriously for another job.

I was still sitting there in my thoughts when I noticed everyone was getting out of their seats. Katharine saw me staring at the opposite wall and said "Max, you're staying for another meeting?" It seemed like a genuine attempt at some humor, and not a put down.

I escaped from my mental job-hunting strategies, embarrassed that perhaps Katharine was reading my mind. Make believe you are tired. Well, you are.

"Sorry, spaced out. Didn't sleep well last night." I got up, hoping that my face wasn't as red as I imagined it. As we left the room, she didn't miss a beat and said, "You know, you really don't have to take these things personally." It was getting very annoying now – not only was she able to take the higher ground in her objective role as a Project Manager, she really *was* reading my mind. I just wanted to get back to my desk already and go searching on the Internet for the next company to work for.

"I wasn't taking it personally. I just find it frustrating to be put in a defensive position like this when no one else seems to take us seriously anyway. It just sounds like a bunch of grandstanding to me." I could see from Katharine's face that she felt justified by her previous comment. This impromptu one-on-one wasn't going well at all, and I had to quickly save face. Perhaps just admit it that you were taking it personally. But was she one to be trusted? I suddenly remembered that she had a weekly meeting with Tom. I wouldn't put it past her to say something to him about this conversation and what had transpired at the status meeting.

Katharine now took the opportunity to "project manage" me. "You know. The best way to ensure that there are no misunderstandings is to ensure good communication between teams. If you think they are not listening to you, instead of just sending an e-mail, pick up the phone, arrange to meet with them." And who is managing the project to make sure that communication happens, and that the flow of information is orderly? I said to myself sarcastically.

I saw that that Katharine was winning this battle, thought better of responding to her lecture, and simply backed down.

"Yes, absolutely." This was a lesson I had learned very quickly since becoming a manager two years ago. Learn which battles are worth fighting, and don't assume anyone else is interested in your personal issues. You're just another person to be run over when necessary.

While we were talking, we had been slowly walking down the hall from the meeting room towards the kitchenette. All sorts of people, most of whom I recognized at least by face, were passing us, and occasionally sneaking an ear into our conversation. This seemed like an opportune time to go get another coffee –a potentially awkward, but probably effective mechanism for changing the subject and giving me the chance to stew over a hot cup on my own and stare at a wall. "Gee, I really need another coffee," I said, and did my best to get to the kitchenette as quickly as possible, hoping to shake her off. Katharine kept up with me, saying that she needed another cup herself. Oh, well.

This was going to be my fifth one today, and probably not my last. We took turns pouring coffee out of the percolator. Katharine rummaged for a packet of sugar in one of the cabinet drawers near the sink, and then went over to the refrigerator for some milk. I decided that the recent meeting entitled me to drink the coffee black so I could get the full impact of the caffeine. We found stools by the window counter and I sipped the coffee quietly, staring out at the other office buildings directly across the street. Katharine held onto her notepad in one hand and rested the coffee on the counter.

"You know I really hate those meetings. Anne and Bill are playing politics all the time and it's the most that I can do to just get them to stay on topic." She took another sip of the coffee and stared out the window. Usually she exuded a sense of utter confidence, so hearing her being so frank about her misgivings was new to me. Once I saw the chink in the armor, I realized that I could possibly use this to my advantage. She was, I reminded myself, only two months on this job, having previously been a senior Development Manager who got moved over to Project Management by Tom. In anticipation of this promotion (or, better, lateral career move), she had been sent to a half a year's worth of project management courses to get her up to speed. It seemed the company was quite intent on giving her anything and everything she needed to succeed and to move ahead. Or to be more precise, it was Tom who seemed to be very interested in getting her ahead, promoting her case with upper management, who for their part seemed to trust Tom with anything and everything about the company's main product, as long as the profits kept increasing. And why was Tom so intent at having Katharine move ahead like this?

In response to her off-the-cuff comment, I summoned up the most inane thing I could say, again intent on not revealing all that was on my mind. "Well, I guess that's how hi-tech is."

As cliché as that was, Katharine nodded in the affirmative.

"That's what happens when you have too many smart people in one place and give them the freedom to do what they want," she said, matching cliché for cliché.

"Well, they can do what they want up until a point. If things start to unravel and the product gets worse and worse, heads will roll."

"Well, maybe. I'm not so sure that that's always the criteria used."

This was starting to sound interesting. Not only was Katharine letting down her guard and speaking her mind, she also sounded just as cynical as I had already become. A rather refreshing revelation. So maybe she wasn't as ruthlessly moving up the ladder as I thought. Or maybe she was. Or maybe she too was doing whatever it took to survive.

"So, what other criteria do they use?"

"Oh, don't be naïve, you've been in this business long enough. Most of the time things don't work out in a company is because of personal conflicts. If you're interviewing two or three people for a job with the same qualifications, if you're smart you take the one you think you can get along with, not necessarily the one with the best qualifications. Or if you're a masochist, you take the best one but who also is gunning for your job."

Katharine was surprisingly giving me some credit for my experience. I was begrudgingly starting to gain a little more respect for hers, as well.

Having blurted out a few of her "deeper" held thoughts, she seemed to have relieved herself of her current frustration, but she was also winded and went back to staring out the window and sipping on her coffee. Then, in a sudden outburst, she looked down at her watch and said "Oh, shit, I have another meeting in five minutes."

She abruptly got out of her seat, trying to take one last sip of her coffee, almost spilling it, and just as abruptly rested it on the counter. "I can leave it here, right? The cleaners will come by and take it, right?"

"Yeah, I think it should be alright."

"Alright, I'm out of here. So, you'll think about what we said?" Then she ran off to the elevators.

I didn't get a chance to reply to her, but what I wanted to say was "what exactly did you intend for me to think about?" I really didn't need her to remind me to think about what she said, because that was what I was going to do anyway. There I was sitting alone in the kitchen, staring off down the hall as Katharine made her way to the elevators to get to her next meeting. My previous low did not now reach an overwhelming high, but within the space of an hour it made its way comfortably to somewhere at neutral. I stared back down at my coffee, stared back down the hall, and then stared at the scribble of notes I had etched into my notebook during the meeting. I sipped the coffee again and tried to remember what it was I was planning to do next. Of course -- it was time to go back to my desk and face the team.

My team all sat on the 5th floor, and I was now on the 6th floor, so it could conceivably take me a long time to get there – perhaps I could drink another coffee, or make yet another trip to the bathroom. It always paid to delay my arrival back to my desk so I could get yet a few more minutes of temporary peace of mind. Gone were the days when I was just a staff writer with my own projects and my own trials and tribulations.

Now I needed to worry about everybody else's trials and tribulations. Many non-managers who never became managers themselves see the most intimidating aspect of becoming a manager as being able to schedule work and assignments, but after getting the boot upstairs it quickly becomes clear to them that the real challenge is dealing with personnel issues and political machinations.

I had only been a "real" manager for about two years. Right before my starting to manage, I was a team leader and a kind of right-hand man to Samantha, the previous Documentation Manager, and it was pretty much a foregone conclusion that I would get the offer to take her place when she left, having performed many of her functions already prior to her departure. Since that time, I encountered just about every personnel issue one could possibly imagine, although even now I am prepared that every day there might yet be something new.

Samantha clued me in on some of the more sordid details of my erstwhile colleagues when she sat me down for that first turnover meeting before she left. There was quite a lot to go over. Samantha had been working at the company for about seven years already, which in this industry is considered a timespan of practically forever.

Tom wasn't the Development VP yet (in fact, he hadn't even started working for the company until about a year before that), and she had previously been reporting to a VP named Garth. Samantha had made her way up the ladder of a typical technical writing career. She had started at the company as a journeyman writer, having spent a few years at some other small companies after she had finished her MA in English Literature at Columbia (or, better put, after she had been kicked out of the doctoral program and offered the honorable way out by passing an exam and writing a master's thesis). She was hired as a Senior Technical Writer, reporting to Terence, the Documentation Manager. Terence had hired her mostly because she had an MA in English Literature, she surmised, because in their initial interview most of the time they were discussing Herman Melville novels.

Once on the job, things seemed to be working out well for her. Her analytical skills became more honed, and she was picking up the technical details better and better, and before long she became the team leader for one of the teams, working on one of the company's major products. Within two to three years on the job, it became apparent that she was management material, and when Terence decided to leave, Garth took Terence's recommendation and offered her Terence's job. And so it went for a few years. Garth, in his day, had trusted Terence with running the show and didn't interfere usually, and Samantha to him was basically an extension of Terence. Then Garth left "to find other challenges," and Tom took over. This was now about three or four years ago. I had noticed that when that change was made, slowly but surely Samantha was less and less available and approachable. With that, she became more distant from the rest of us, rarely eating lunch with us anymore, and off at meetings upon meetings that would often spill over lunchtime or sometimes go late into the evening.

I had been hired two years before that, and I seemed to be channeling Samantha's career trajectory. At first, I considered a manager and positions above it as only fit for Type A personalities who were go-getters, totally assured of themselves and willing to trample over others if necessary, and so I never thought it would ever be for me. However, I was very independent in my own right, over time requiring less and less managerial oversight, occasionally being assigned as the "head writer" on joint projects

with other writers, and so it happened one day I was offered a team leader position. Samantha gave me the offer in one of our scheduled one-on-one meetings. I reacted with genuine surprise, appreciation, and utter fear. Perhaps she saw the fear in my eyes, but I already betrayed it when I said, "I wonder how the other writers are going to take this." She gave me that experience-weary look (four- or five-years' worth) and said that they would treat me fine – to my face. There may be all sorts of talk and gossip behind my back, but I'll be less privy to it from this point forward. So, if you're not going to be privy to it anymore, she said, don't worry about it. Easy for her to say.

As Don Corleone said, "This is an offer you can't refuse," so I graciously accepted. Samantha explained that as the manager she found she could no longer devote all of her personal time and attention to every person and project as she once was able to, so Tom decided that the department would be divided up into three groups, led by me, Agatha, and Fred, respectively. Each one of us, in turn, was assigned four writers. In a separate meeting, Samantha explained to the three of us how the new organization would work, and who would get which projects and which writers. Generally, it was divided up according to subject area and writer expertise, although occasionally some arbitrary "reassignments" were made.

As Samantha went over each point, Agatha's face was slowly turning different colors of the rainbow. I even sensed a tinge of hostility from her broadcasting in my direction. I had not really had any interaction with Agatha up until then, just occasionally saying hello in the hallway or occasionally joining a large group that was eating lunch together in the company dining room. She was a real old-timer, having been in the company about 10 years now. She was from the "old school," from even before when the Internet had taken off and conquered the world. As far as she was concerned, she had worked in the trenches of Technical Writing from the time it was less respected or even acknowledged as a profession, and labored for years as a senior writer, but never got a management position. It was probably based on this seniority that Tom and Samantha felt it was "owed" to her to get a team leader position. She had never really been terribly friendly to me, I guess figuring I was a young upshot who didn't really deserve her respect. So, when I was made a team leader at her level, it really gnawed at her.

After this meeting, Samantha called another meeting of the whole staff of fifteen writers, including the new team leaders, and announced the new organizational structure. At first, she was greeted by a full set of stunned stares. I saw the four people who were assigned to me suddenly looking at me with yet undecipherable expressions. People who I once would greet cheerfully in the hallway or occasionally work with on a project as a colleague, instantly erected walls to protect themselves against their new "superior." Having been plucked out of the ranks and made a team leader, I told myself that I wouldn't be like all the other managers – those who ignore their employees' needs and personal nuances and simply demand output. I looked at my four assignees and tried to break a pleasant smile, but I sensed it probably looked awkward and even goofy. I quickly looked over to Agatha to see how big her scowl was that day, and then glanced over at her new assignees. As I suspected, the general expression was one of horror, with a glazing of shock.

After Samantha had finished her announcement, she asked for any questions. The few bold ones raised their hands almost immediately. Betty, a seasoned writer now on Fred's team, wanted to know if there would be changes in project assignments. Carol, the graphic artist, wanted to know why she was assigned to Agatha and not directly to

Samantha, as she handled work relevant to all the writers. Jim, who was assigned to me, wanted to know if he would have to move from his current desk. Samantha handled each question patiently, to the point, but with a tinge of cloudiness. The bottom line was "for now we'll continue with how we are working, and the new team leaders and I will start discussing any needs for adjustments." I wrote this down verbatim – it seemed like a good standard line I'd need to revisit at some time in the near future.

This visit down memory lane brought things back into perspective for me – yet again. It reminded me how I got to where I am and why I was sheepishly sitting here with my coffee, avoiding at all costs going back to my desk. I already predicted it then at the meeting with Samantha. Agatha and Jim were the most unhappy when the department was reorganized, and they didn't disappoint me with further unhappiness as time went on.

A day after the bombshell, I started setting up shop in my new room (sitting on my own for the first time in my career). Shortly after the IT technician finished setting up my PC and left, I began unpacking the boxes I had moved from my other desk when Jim suddenly appeared at the door. Jim was the second oldest person in my group, after Agatha, somewhere in his late fifties. He had a slightly shaggy, graying beard, and wore a checkered shirt and hiking boots, resulting in a kind of laid-back student, urban anti-yuppie look.

I remembered having a conversation with him once at lunch when he told me he had been an Art History student, having travelled through Europe for his studies, and ending up not finishing his degree. He came across Technical Writing much in the same way that others did, by having a chance conversation with a programmer friend and enrolling in a set of Technical Writing courses at a local university. While he still dreamed of writing a dissertation on medieval Greek Orthodox art and running an Art museum, his temporary detour into Technical Writing was too relatively lucrative to give up on, and so he became one of the many veterans still hacking away at the profession.

As he had been in the business so many years now and had gone through several managers and team leaders, he had seen it all, and probably saw me as just the latest roadblock to be overcome. Based on the question he had asked at the general meeting, I sensed that he didn't necessarily like having too many changes thrown his way. His desk was the last in a row of office cubicles in the large hall, open to and facing the windows at the end of the row. The view included the same office building that Katharine and I had seen from the kitchenette from the 6th floor, as well as the river in the distance on which small boats gently glided back and forth. It was this view that Jim had fought tooth and nail to get after many years, and the one he'd been damned to lose under any circumstances.

"You got a minute?" he asked me as I turned to look at him. I was down on my knees at this point, examining where my computer had been set up and whether all the wires were plugged in to the right places.

"Yeah, sure, of course Jim. Have a seat – well, let's first take that box off of it so you can sit." I found myself instinctively trying to be as accommodating as possible – and maybe my overly-polite tone was more apparent than I wanted it to be. This, of course, was my first "official" meeting with my "new" employee, and such first impressions usually set the tone for a relationship moving forward. In the past when I had spoken to Jim one-on-one

or observed him interacting with others, I found him to be intimidating – so I went into this meeting already at a disadvantage. He reminded me of a co-worker at a previous company I was at when I was a lot greener, who commented to me when a new manager was put over us that "Now I have to figure out how I'm going to manage *this* manager."

Jim made no effort to take the box off the chair, and so I was forced to get up from the floor and remove it myself. One point for Jim. I sat down in my own chair and looked at Jim. I was ready to say, "So what's on your mind?" but only the first S came out when Jim cut in and said "Max, I want to know what your plans are for me. I've been working on a lot of projects for years that I've nurtured and brought up to proper standards and I don't think anyone else would be able to do even the smallest bit of justice to them. I've spoken to Samantha about this already and she's perfectly in agreement with me."

It was clear that Jim had this speech well prepared and had set the groundwork well for whatever demands he was about to make. One more point for Jim. I was so taken aback by his forwardness and determination, that I struggled quickly to find an appropriate reply. Was I to be an assertive, domineering boss, and fight fire with fire, or was I to reply in a measured, well-crafted manner and throw out empty catch phrases that are taught in management courses? I could see Jim saw my hesitation and he knew he had me at a disadvantage. Jim was now far ahead of me at 3-0.

"Well, Jim, I certainly appreciate what you've done for the department, for the company, for your projects. I really haven't given it a lot of thought yet if any changes are needed."

The notes that I had taken at Samantha's meeting came in handy when I formulated this reply, but I don't think it resulted in a score for me.

"But you might be thinking about making some changes, right? I really hope not. You know you shouldn't make changes just for the sake of making changes."

Jim had predetermined how and to where this conversation was to go. I don't know how deviously detailed he had been in preparing for the meeting – if he imagined that I'd be on my knees on the floor when he arrived, or that there would be a box on the chair that I'd have to move – but it seemed clear that he had planned for the general thrust of the conversation and didn't seem prepared to hear anything to the contrary.

It was already point, set, and match at this juncture, and I basically was held speechless.

As I continued to stare from out the window into the past, I painfully reminded myself that that had been the beginning of a very unpleasant stretch which often times resulted in me sitting with a coffee just like now but muttering under my breath and cursing out Jim's name. In retrospect, my current problems seemed somewhat less horrible considering my initial bumpy start, but that didn't yet prompt me to get out of my seat and go back to the battlefield below. Instead, I ruminated further on those first few weeks of my new job.

Shortly after that first losing effort with Jim, I had my next adversary to deal with. Samantha had set up a weekly team leader meeting with me, Fred, and Agatha. Recalling the first general team meeting we had, I was not looking forward to having to deal with Agatha in closer quarters. I didn't really know too much about Fred, so I wasn't anticipating anything one way or the other, and I convinced myself there was nothing to

worry about with him. However, this meeting was going to be the first time I had to prove myself in front of "peers," and although we weren't competing with each other for each other's jobs, I definitely sensed competitiveness in the air. It looked like the future management of the department was at stake.

At the appointed time, we all found a seat in Samantha's office. Actually, I found the only seat that was still empty. I arrived about a minute before the meeting was called for, but Agatha and Fred had already arrived well before that, and Agatha had parked herself in the chair as close as possible to where Samantha was sitting behind her desk. Fred had taken the chair right next to Agatha, which was slightly further away from Samantha, but nonetheless parked as close as possible to the desk. The remaining empty chair was sitting at an askew angle yet further away. When I straightened it out to face Samantha and sat on it, it felt like I was sitting a little bit lower than the other two. Also, Samantha's computer screen was situated directly opposite me on her desk, such that I had a partially obscured view of her. Fred suddenly sensed that I was behind him, and inched ever so slightly backwards, ostensibly to give me a better view of Samantha, but it was not that much better. I saw no potential ally in him.

"So, it looks like we're all here" Samantha began the meeting, looking at me. "Fred, can you move back a little further so that Max can move in a little more? Thanks. So how are the teams doing after our last meeting and all the announcements?"

Not surprisingly, Agatha replied first.

"You'd think that the world was coming to an end the way these writers reacted. For some reason they seem to believe that this is just the beginning, that there will be other restructuring and eventually layoffs. I think I was able to put them at ease regarding this, and at the same time emphasized that we must focus on our assignments, not on groundless rumors."

"Well, that was very sensibly put, Agatha, thanks for handling that. Fred, Max?"

Fred said "Well, pretty much what Agatha said. I had to have a long conversation with Betty, who seemed to think that there must have been some mistake in how the teams were assigned."

There was a short pause, then everyone looked at me. I'm sure my blank stare was prominent, and Agatha's aggressive stare didn't help. I coughed, then took Fred's comment as a cue. "Well, Jim seemed a little agitated about the whole thing. He came into my office and basically read me the Riot Act, claiming that you had spoken to him about improving our documentation standards."

Agatha voiced a not too subtle harrumph, and said "Oh, you're going to let that guy push you around? Not a good start, I think."

I turned red. Not a good start, indeed.

I had supposed, incorrectly, that this meeting was meant to be an open forum of team leaders trying to work together to solve issues. Now I wanted to kick myself in the head for even opening my mouth. Agatha reminded me of bullies I had to deal with when I was a kid. My instinctive reaction was always to just try to survive, trying the best I could

to keep out of their way. Instead, they always smelled weakness and would go for the kill without hesitation. While Jim had tempered his behavior with me because I was now officially his superior, Agatha had no motive to be concerned with what my reaction would be and went straight for the jugular.

I cleared my throat in an attempt to buy time, and the best that I could mutter in reply was "No, not a good start. But I'll take care of it." Fred and Samantha were looking at me all the while, and they didn't seem terribly impressed with my reply.

"Well, based on my experience with Jim, he's not going to just let it go at that," said Samantha. "What did he say specifically that he and I spoke about?" I'm not sure that she had intended to put me on the spot, but her question did, as I hadn't prepared a list of specifics. I tried desperately not to stutter, and half mumbled "Oh, all sorts of things. If you're interested, I can ask him to prepare a list of what he is talking about." Agatha looked over at Fred with a slightly raised eyebrow and a smirk that indicated a lack of respect for me. I noticed it, and I'm sure she was hoping that I did.

Samantha gave a shrug and said "You know what. If you think it's important, generate the list and see if there is anything of interest. So, except for a few non-surprises, we're moving in the right direction. Good." Good for her, not so good for me.

The meeting didn't go on much longer than that, and as it began to wind down, Agatha was already half out of her seat (even while Samantha was still talking), and Fred was looking at his notes.

"Okay, good meeting everyone," Samantha said, and as she rose from her chair, we all did the same.

As I rose from my seat in the present and moved away from the counter, I searched for the wastebasket, tossed the cup into it, and then slowly walked down the same corridor that Katharine had previously walked down to get to the elevators. I looked at my watch and remembered that in about ten minutes I had a one-on-one meeting with Betty. She had previously been on Fred's team when Samantha had initially split up the department, and now *she* was one of *my* team leaders.

After making her a team leader in place of Agatha, who had left the company not long after I was made manager (which was apparently the last straw for her), Betty toned down any negativity towards me that she may have had, presumably because she was genuinely grateful for the promotion. Like Agatha before her, she had felt that the promotion was owed to her based on her longevity and what she felt was her value to the company. Again, like Agatha, she had never been shy about expressing her feelings, negative or otherwise, but she seemed intent on tempering herself now, and maintained a level of respect for me.

Despite this, she had no inhibitions in expressing any frustrations she had in general, or with me in particular. The once or twice that I had been late for our one-on-one meetings, she let me know she was annoyed with ever a faint scowl. I made light of this the first time with an uncomfortable laugh, which only made her scowl more forcefully. I decided at that point it was just better worth it to be more careful about being punctual and to avoid the unnecessary tension it caused. Perhaps a more self-assured manager would have just ignored the scowls.

It quickly dawned on me that I didn't have that much more time to go before getting to my room where Betty was no doubt waiting for me. I hurried up to the elevators and pressed the button. I looked at my watch and saw that I still had five minutes to go, but I could already feel my stress level rising.

When the elevator finally arrived, I nervously pushed the button for the 5th floor and unconsciously began to mutter under my breath. There were two other people in the elevator with me and they glanced at me quizzically.

I tried my best not to bang into the other people as they and I left the elevator and quickened my pace just a bit to make sure I wouldn't be late. When I got to my room, I was mildly out of breath, but it looked like I had made it with about a minute to spare. I immediately saw Betty sitting straight up in the guest chair, and I noticed a quick small smirk on her face. She may have been giving me my due all this time as her manager, but she seemed to be reveling in her consistent victory of putting the fear of God in me.

I slowed down a bit to give the false impression that I had not been walking quickly and made it over to my seat behind my desk. I banged into a pile of papers that got shifted somewhat, and it looked like Betty was fighting the urge to laugh.

I sat down, looked at my watch, and said "Well, I guess let's start our meeting, right? How are things?"

Betty started to dive into the many issues that she had with her team, the company, and all else. Based on the regular set of complaints she rattled off at each of our meetings, I wondered to myself if she ever gained any joy out of her time at work, let alone life. I suppose the happiest moment for her in her entire career at the company was when I told her she would be getting Agatha's position. When I had invited her to meet one-on-one back then, and closed the door to my office, it looked like she was ready to faint, probably thinking I was going to fire her. When I finally came around to making her the offer for the team leader position, she heaved out a huge sigh, and instead of a shriek of joy she badly concealed some tears. Since that day we have had an unspoken agreement that she can hurl any abuse at me that she chose, but only to a point, and I would obligingly help her solve any problems she might have.

The set of complaints she brought to the table this time were not new, and some not much different than my own complaints that I had voiced to Katherine about an hour before. The developers were making changes to the user interface without letting us know about them, and the error messages they were coding were written in some language nowhere near recognizable as English. She didn't fail to mention that in her view her team members were rarely up to their tasks, and it was always she who came to the rescue, such as reminding them about the advanced features of our word processing tool, or how to effectively get information out of developers in order to document a feature.

After blurting out her list of complaints, she suddenly said, seemingly out of the blue, "Well, at least I don't have to deal with Jim and Agatha anymore."

Just as Agatha with was me when I first got my team leader position, when I eventually gave Betty that position, Jim was furious that he was not chosen instead and stormed

into my room to complain shortly after my announcement to the entire team. There were no more pretenses at this point, and he directly demanded of me why I had chosen her over him. Why didn't I even suggest to him that he might want it? His response and his lack of tact confirmed to me why I hadn't even considered offering him the job in the first place. Although Betty had the same lofty opinion of herself, she at least had a better sense of what was professionally (and politically) acceptable behavior. And while Betty was no great democrat when it came to deal with her team members, it was clear to me that if Jim were in the same position he would have become an out-and-out dictator.

When we finished the meeting and Betty went off with her pained expression, I leaned back in my chair and stretched my arms over my head. From a tense meeting with my fellow team leaders, and then a mild reprimand from the Project Manager, a trip down memory lane, and then finally to a reasonably held one-on-one meeting with one of my team leaders, I was feeling a sense of balance. Perhaps not full relief, and still with a sense of dread from all the tasks, meetings, and decisions that were gnawing at the back of my mind, but still a sense of healthy perspective and less feeling of despair. And all within a couple of hours. A bit of sunshine beamed in from the window behind my head, and it was enough to briefly undo the knot that had been tightening in my chest. This was a standard dynamic that I had experienced for a few years now, and I realized it was time already to gain some more self-confidence. You've been the manager for a couple of years, Max. Whatever upper management may be thinking or saying about you was one thing, but you were still here, and that surely meant they were pleased with you at least to some degree.

And just as abruptly as my change of attitude to the positive, the phone rang, and I nearly fell back as I was leaning a bit too far in that direction. I straightened out but had to brace myself with the chair handles, and nervously picked up the phone.

"Max Symon speaking."

"Max, it's Tom. Just had a conversation with Katharine. We had a little discussion about the release and I'm a little concerned about the documentation bugs. Can you come down and have a talk about it? Are you free in the next 15 minutes?"

I wanted to be anything but free, but I figured I had no choice.

"I was in the middle of something; can it be in about 30 minutes?" It sounded like I better gather my notes and anything else I had related to the bugs to best defend myself, if necessary. It probably meant going online and printing out bug reports from the bug tracking system.

"Um, okay, I'm a bit busy here – see if you can make it sooner."

"Okay, sure."

He hung up, and I started nervously shuffling around the piles of papers and notebooks on my desk, trying to get ready data that backed up any of the comments I had made at the status meeting with the team leaders. I couldn't believe that Katharine had done this to me and so quickly. What a bitch! Back to the panic of before, and now with only 20 minutes to spare. I guess I was right all along about looking for that other job.

Now in high-frenzy mode, and desperately hoping that I was gathering the right numbers I needed for the meeting with Tom, the phone rang yet again. Was Tom not satisfied with 30 minutes, and now he wanted me to come in 15 after all? I had no choice but to pick up the phone. It wasn't the voice I was expecting.

"So, I finally have to call you at work to talk with you?"

"Linda?"

"Yes, who else did you think it was?"

"H-hi. I didn't expect you to call me here. Can I call you back in a little bit? I have to go to an important meeting in literally 15 minutes."

"Don't bullshit me, Max, like you usually do. When exactly will you call?"

"The meeting was really sudden. I'm not sure how long it will take. Can I call later in the day when everything calms down?"

"Well, *I'm* not going to calm down until then."

"Sorry, Linda, I'm really sorry."

"About what?"

"Linda, can we discuss this later, please?"

"Jerk!" She slammed the phone down. Now I was really up shit's creek. I just didn't have enough time to get my notes properly put together, and now Linda was furious with me (well, she already was furious with me starting two days ago). I did say I was going to call her this morning, but I had forgotten to. By the sounds of it, it looked like she was soon going to forget about *me*.

I had maybe another five or ten minutes to assemble in some orderly fashion whatever papers I had pulled off my desk and anything I could manage to print out from the online bug tracking system. Despite the pep talk I had just given myself, I assumed the worse with this meeting, especially since Tom had requested it so soon after I had opened my mouth at the status meeting.

It seemed pretty clear to me what the sequence of events would be by the time the evening was over – I would be strewn across the carpet by Tom, perhaps the first step in my eventual probation period leading up to my termination. Even if I would survive the upcoming evening with Linda, it eventually would be the end with her as I would be without a job. I was quite impressed with myself that up until now I hadn't become an alcoholic over the years after all the ups and downs of my career and my relationship problems, but I knew that the thing that prevented me most from following that route was my fear of hangovers.

I bundled all the pertinent papers in the order I finally decided upon, slipped them into my notebook and marched off out of the office to the elevators once again. Tom's office, befitting his position, was yet another floor up, and so I directed the elevator to go to the

7th floor. I was starting to sweat, and I hoped that it wasn't too apparent on my forehead. As I quickly passed the offices on the 7th floor, I sensed that the people in them were catching my image out of the corners of theirs eyes, wondering who this madman was racing down the hall. It wasn't too long before I reached Tom's office, and to my luck the door was closed, giving me a few moments to brush my hair with my hand, wipe any moisture off my head, and to frantically organize my thoughts. Although I would have preferred standing there all day rather than to go in, I took a final gulp and knocked.

"Come on in," Tom said. I opened the door slowly, and first saw Tom behind his desk, and then Katharine as the door opened further. They both bore a polite smile on their faces, but if that meant something positive or negative for me it wasn't clear. I came in and saw that there was a chair set up for me facing the both of them. I sat down and placed the notebook on my lap, with pen out ready to write. I clutched onto the notebook with the bug reports inside it like it was a life preserver, me bobbing along with it on the surface of a chilly lake.

"Katharine spoke to me about the status meeting you guys just had."

Tom's opening line was vanilla enough. It gave me no indication as to which direction the conversation would go. I harkened back to all those conversations I had had with Samantha and the management courses they sent me to just over a year ago and braced for the tidal wave. Those courses had always seemed so safe. The instructors always spoke in the abstract, and the modicum of respect they gave the students as managers, new or not, gave you a feeling that you were part of the club, and that you were being imparted with the secrets of the trade such that you felt assured that you would remain in the club as long as you chose to.

And now here I was in what would seem to an outsider like a routine meeting with my boss and the Product Manager, one of those types of meetings they would mention in the management courses. I gave my notebook another squeeze and waited for the wave to approach. Faintly in the back of my mind I thought of Linda and wondered if indeed I was jerk. And then I thought about that status meeting in the future with the heads of Development, QA, Project Management, and Technical Writing, all of whom I did not recognize.