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Judgement

by Fran Duffield

For a long time, I did not move from the dark, wood-panelled hall. The echoes of the busy clicking heels of the clerks had faded into the dimness at the far end of the corridor. The heavy wooden doors of the chambers were all closed, blank except for the scars of incidental damage and a brass number. Behind each one were decisions: dusty shelves, crammed drawers, archived hard drives, indifferent distant servers, all full of decisions. Each one a knife to cut someone's life into pieces, each official signature a convoluted rope to hang yourself with. And I still could not work out how I got here, how I got to be sitting on a hard bench with my head in my hands.

I was no longer who I had been, the person I had learned so hard a lesson to become. There could be no going back now. A last intermittent shaft of wintry sunlight struggled through a weather-streaked window at the top of the stairs, and I watched it gradually change its narrow angle across the floor and fade away. I'm not sure how long I sat there, but eventually I heard a heavy tread and a jingling of keychain on the stairs and a shaven-headed security guard eyed me coldly, boots squeaking on the polished parquet.

"We'll be closing the building in ten minutes," he announced, with obvious contempt.

He knew he didn't need to bother about speaking to me with respect. I nodded in acknowledgement. I didn't want to engage with him, with anybody. My solicitor had hastily disengaged after the judgement, all apologies and sympathy, bat-like robes flapping as she disappeared down the corridor. No longer any financial incentive, only a final invoice to be issued, job done, and home in time for pre-dinner drinks.

I pushed myself to my feet, legs numb with sitting, and glanced back at the bench, varnish thinned where many hands had grasped the arms.

It remained solid, impassive: the next day some other fool would sit where I had been, clutch the edge of the seat, bow their head in dejection. The security guard was checking the window and fire doors for the approaching night, and would be turning back towards me any moment. I began my descent into hell, step by step down the worn stairs.



I crept towards the main doors, one of which was already heavily bolted into the mosaic floor, and slipped through the gap. As I pulled the high door closed by its ornate handle, a long hollow boom reverberated through the empty corridor inside. It was the sound of my life imploding: from this moment everyone who had been my friend would be oddly unavailable, or if they had to see me, an embarrassed half smile of unspoken disapproval would be fixed on their faces.

The darkening street outside seemed to be in some other reality. I was invisible to the office workers loosening their ties as they shouldered their way into the The Crown on the opposite corner for the so-called Happy Hour, delaying their inevitable journey. Women tottered up Corporation Street in work heels, carrying bags of shopping picked up on the way home. People craned their necks to see if that bus swaying round the loop above the underpass was a 14 or a 55, sat down again with resignation when it wasn't their bus. Pigeons swooped, settling on the ledges of the Victorian buildings for the night. All of them had someone to go to, all of them belonged somewhere, and I didn't anymore. For me it was Judgement Day.