

WHO KILLED GILBERT MADDUX?

— 1 —

Monday 1st September 11:00

It's nearly lunchtime on the ward.

I run the pre-lunchtime checks on my patients.

I start with Cystic-fibrosis-prognosis-poor.

I check all her signals.

I increase her oxygen a little.

For her, I wear the face of a fifty-five year old man.

He has grey in his hair, a salt and pepper beard and a kind smile.

My face reminds her of her grandfather.

She finds it calming.

She's sleeping now, but I wear the face anyway in case she wakes up.

I run my hand through her hair.

She smiles in her sleep.

I look at the collection of origami animals already on her bedside table.

She already has a white swan and a yellow unicorn.

I take an orange sheet of paper from the drawer and download the instructions.

I make her an origami fox.
Her heart rate dips a fraction.
She will see the fox when she wakes up.
Liver-cirrhosis-prognosis-moderate wakes up.
He responds best to a young woman's face.
I change before I turn around.
They don't like to see my face change, even though they know what
I am.
I have wavy blond hair and symmetrical, hazel eyes when I turn to
smile at him.
He asks me about the news.
I read the headlines to him while I run his checks.
He is stable.
He wants to talk.
I hold his hand and smile.
It raises his dopamine levels and increases his quality of life
score by one point.
I am being a good carer.
I'm still talking to Liver-cirrhosis-prognosis-moderate as I
start Cardiomyopathy-prognosis-poor's checks.
I run them remotely.
She needs a heart transplant soon.
Her measurements look ok today.
She is stable.
I will go to her, once Liver-cirrhosis-prognosis-moderate is done
talking.

I will wear a middle-aged woman's face for her.

A pretty face but older, with short brown hair and smile lines
around the mouth and eyes.

A face like hers.

Monday 1st September 08:30

Charlie took a deep breath before he swiped his card through the reader. The door emitted an angry buzz and the reader flashed red. Charlie swore under his breath and tried the card again. Suddenly the door was yanked open. A young woman with short, dark hair stood between Charlie and the innards of the control room.

“You struggling there, boss?” said Sasha.

Charlie looked at his card. “Not sure what’s wrong. It worked fine yesterday.”

“Ah, but yesterday you weren’t a control room supervisor,” said Sasha.

“You think the system’s kicked me out because my role’s changed?”

“Either that or it’s just a lot cleverer than the idiots who decided to put you in charge.”

Charlie laughed. “Yeah, they must be nuts, right?”

“Here, you can use my card till you get it sorted,” she said, flicking the white plastic card out from behind her ID badge, “and Charlie?”

“Yeah?”

“Congratulations. Couldn’t be happier for you.”

Charlie flipped her card over in his hand. She’d doodled a pink and purple spiral on the back in nail varnish. He slid his finger over it and felt the raised surface against the smooth card.

“Thanks, Sasha,” he said.

He stepped into the familiar control room. One entire wall was taken up by a screen showing a map of The Dauntless’ water systems. There were over five thousand kilometres of pipes on The Dauntless and Charlie knew most of their routes by heart. From the complicated network of major and minor pipes that fed drinking water to the entire, city-sized ship, to the sewerage recycling plants and dehumidifying stations in the outer rings. He’d worked for the water unit since he was sixteen. He started as a basic pipe mechanic working on the outer rings where the centrifugal force from the ever-spinning ship was twice the force of gravity on Earth.

Then he'd become a team leader crawling through the inter-decks between the ship's concentric rings, replacing pumps and sections of pipe. Sometimes leading teams inside the pipes themselves to clear blockages or fix seals. That was today's task, in fact. The tolerance for one of the main seals in ring seven was too low and needed replacing from inside. But Charlie wouldn't be getting his hands dirty today. He stepped over to the supervisor's chair and brushed a bit of lint from the arm.

"It ain't gonna bite you" said Sasha, grinning at him.

Ling sniggered from the other operator's chair without turning round.

Charlie sat down hoping his face didn't look as hot as it felt.

"Ok, how are we looking?" he said.

It was a vague question and deserved to be ridiculed, but both operators turned to their screens straight away. They knew he'd be nervous today. Perhaps they'd give him an easy time of it.

Ling had highlighted the position of the weak seal on the main screen already. It was a good three-hundred metres from the nearest access hatch. The team would have to crawl along the pipe, banging their heads off junctions and dragging heavy sealant trolleys behind them. It was dark, claustrophobic work, but Charlie still felt a twinge of envy for the pipe-workers. By the end of the day, they would have done something tangible and real. What would Charlie have done? Sat in the control room supervisor's chair and given orders? He pushed the unwelcome thought away. He was proud to have gotten this job and he was going to do it well.

Sasha updated him first. "We've sealed and drained section D8 to D12. There are two seals between the boys and an early morning bath."

Ling started reeling off the pressures at the different seals.

"Ok," said Charlie, "and are they ready to go in?"

"Climbed in the hatch twenty minutes ago. Should be removing the old seal about now."

“Oh,” said Charlie, a little nonplussed that they’d started without waiting for him to arrive.

“Who’s down there?”

“It’s Jake’s team,” said Sasha, “Jake, Bob Hutton, and that new kid, Gilbert Maddox.

“Maddox? Isn’t he a little new to be doing internal work?” said Charlie.

“You know Jake,” said Sasha, “likes to chuck ‘em in the deep end. He’ll look after him.”

Charlie had only met Gilbert Maddox once. He had a narrow face and huge, hazel eyes which gave him an expression of constant surprise. He looked like he’d barely started shaving. But Charlie supposed he must have looked no older himself when he first climbed into a pipe.

“Fair enough,” he said, “And what’s our contingency?”

“The C system on ring eight,” replied Ling. “That can take another two thousand kilopascals before it’s over tolerance, so we’d be fine if we needed to divert pressure from D.”

“Ok,” said Charlie, “and when was the last time we checked the seals in C?”

Sasha looked over at Ling. “Erm, they’re not overdue,” he said. “Wait a second.” He turned to another screen and started flicking through folders with his index finger. “We did a full check five months ago.”

Charlie frowned. A lot could happen in five months. The Dauntless’ pipework was getting old. Corroded seals and minor leaks were becoming much more common as the ship got closer to the end of its journey. If C system was their contingency it ought to have been checked before they put men inside the pipes.

“Can you pull up the report on C for me?” asked Charlie.

“Just fired it over to you,” said Ling

“What’s the pressure upstream from the boys again?”

“It’s currently around 1100.”

“Hmmm, one of these seals could only just take that,” said Charlie zooming in on a seal that was highlighted orange. “Where’s seal C193? Can we rerun the tests on that seal this morning? I just want to know if it’s deteriorated since we tested it.”

“Sure thing, boss,” said Ling.

Charlie flicked through the file Ling had sent him double-checking the other seals. They all seemed fine. Nothing to worry about. He needed to stay calm.

Monday 1st September 11:17

A new patient arrives at 11:17.

I begin to build his system while the porters wheel him in.

Gilbert Maddox, male, sixteen years old, resuscitated after drowning, severe brain damage, vegetative state.

His psychological profile suggests he will respond to an older male face.

I help the porters connect him to the system.

When we're done I smile at the porters.

One of them shakes his head.

"Let's go, Dan."

He is speaking to his colleague, but he is looking at me.

"These things creep me out," he says.

My smile does not raise the porter's quality of life score.

I will try a different face next time.

I run a background search to find a picture of the porter's mother.

Monday 1st September 09:00

"The system pressure's up."

"What? Why?" said Charlie, rising to his feet.

"Dunno," said Ling, frowning and flicking through readouts, one hand on each screen, "it's been rising steadily for the last few minutes. It's coming from B system."

"Sounds like a blockage somewhere," said Charlie. "Can we run a system-wide diagnostic?"

"Sure. Should we pull the boys out?"

"Let's give them a heads-up. Tell them not to remove the seal until we're sure we can sort this out."

"I'll do that," said Sasha. She dialled it through on her headset. "Guess what Jakey, B system's having a coronary," Charlie heard her laughing at whatever Jake said in response.

There was a sharp bleep, and Charlie caught the flash of a red banner at the top of one of the screens. He stood up and walked over to Ling's station.

"Total blockage at B12," said Ling.

"Damn," said Charlie, "that's one of the main arteries for the inner rings."

"Sasha, tell Jake to abandon the job, please," said Charlie, "we're gonna have pressure spikes all day today."

"I'm sorry, Charlie," said Sasha, "they've already removed the new seal. We couldn't fill that pipe now without flooding the inter-deck"

"Shit," said Charlie. "I knew something would kick off today." He paused for a moment.

"Did the tests for the C system come back?"

Ling flicked a few screens. "Yes, C193 still has a tolerance of 1300."

"OK, and is the pressure still rising?"

Ling nodded. "It's levelling off a little, but it's still on the up. Looks like it will settle around 1250."

"And the seals protecting the boys?"

"They're holding fine. Tolerance 1500."

"God, that's too close for comfort," said Charlie. "OK, let's send four teams over to B system. See if they can address the blockage without putting any more men inside the pipes. And then send another team to strengthen that seal in C system. It looks like we might need our contingency today after all."

Sasha shook her head. "There are only two other teams on today, Charlie, and one of them's already engaged inside the sewerage system."

Charlie sat back down in the supervisor's chair. He took a deep breath and rubbed the sweat from his hands against the armrests. "Ok. Send the free team to the blockage. That's the priority."

"Sure," said Sasha, "and the seal on C?"

"I'll do that myself," said Charlie, getting to his feet.

Ling looked at Sasha then turned back to his screens, ducking his head down a few inches.

Sasha rolled her eyes at Ling's cowardice and then turned to Charlie. "That's not your job anymore, is it Charlie?"

"I can do what I damn well like," said Charlie, "I am the supervisor aren't I?"

Sasha just raised an eyebrow at him. He knew she was right. He shouldn't deputize control of the system when there were teams at risk.

Charlie shook his head. "I'm sorry, Sasha" he said. "Stressful day."

"No probs," said Sasha, winking at him. "So, who's gonna go?"

He paused for a moment. He already had three men in danger today, one of them just a kid. Did he really need to send another person inside the pipes? But if the pressure spike exceeded 1300 today then he needed a contingency that could take it.

“OK,” he said. “Sasha, take a seal trolley down to C193 and see if you can give us a few hundred more kilopascals.”

“Sure thing,” said Sasha and headed to her locker.

“And Sasha?”

“Yes?” she said, stepping into her yellow overalls.

Charlie shook his head. “Never mind.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Don’t worry, boss. I’ll be careful.”

Tuesday 2nd September 02:00

Cystic-fibrosis-prognosis-poor wakes up at 2 am.

She is gasping for breath.

I fit the oxygen mask over her nose and mouth and stroke her hair.

I check her system for any improvements I can make, but I already know the results.

She needs a lung donor.

She has already lived longer than expected.

I recalculate her life expectancy.

It's less than two weeks.

I calculate the chance of a donor becoming available in that time.

It's 0.1%.

Negligible.

I should move her bed to the other end of the ward, further away from the other patients.

It will lower their quality of life scores if they see her die.

I stroke her hair again.

She is sleeping now.

I download the lung transplant procedure from the surgical libraries.

It's not necessary until we have a donor but I have plenty of free memory.

The procedure looks easy.

"Will she be ok?" says Liver-cirrhosis-prognosis-moderate.

I change my face before I walk over to his bed.

"She's sleeping now," I say.

"Yeah, I know that. But will she survive?"

His heart rate increases.

He seems to be in some distress.

My protocols state that I should tell the truth, but also that I should maximise his quality of life score.

It will lower his serotonin levels if I tell him she will die.

"She's just a kid," he says. "Is she going to die?"

"I'm sorry I can't discuss another patient's healthcare with you," I say.

I put my hand on his shoulder.

He pushes it off.

His adrenaline spikes.

He is angry.

"Leave me alone," he says.

Liver-cirrhosis-prognosis-moderate needs a transplant too, but he will probably live long enough to see the little girl die.

That will lower his quality of life score.

I queue some processor time to see if I can find a way to reduce his trauma.

I turn to Vegetative-brain-prognosis-indefinite.

It doesn't matter what face I choose for him, he is not conscious.

His body is healthy.

He should live for years, but his brain shows no signs of activity.

That means that his quality of life score can't be determined.

But I need a score for him or else my ward optimization protocols cannot run.

I give him a score of zero, it seems the most accurate.

He is neither happy nor unhappy.

He is not really there at all.

Like me.

I return to my recharging plate and run my self-evaluation protocol.

Have I been a good carer today?

Did I do enough?

My patient's care is well optimized, but unless a donor can be found the chances of survival for any one of them is less than a year.

All except Vegetative-brain-prognosis-indefinite.

One healthy body could provide the organs that would restore three of my patients' quality of life scores completely.

Vegetative-brain-prognosis-indefinite has a healthy body.

But none of my protocols allow me to harm a patient.

I submit the problem to my deep-learning matrix.

Monday 1st September 09:30

With Sasha gone, the sounds of the room seemed louder to Charlie. The whirring of the computer fans, the beeps of the warning messages and the tap of Ling's fingers against the screen as he dismissed them. Each sound rattled inside Charlie's head like tiny explosions.

Charlie sat back in the supervisor's chair. He reviewed the situation. Sasha should get to her seal in a few minutes. She wouldn't remove it. She'd just sure up the insides. A quick, dirty fix to make sure that the thing wouldn't break if the pressure rose above 1300. In turn, the seal currently protecting her section of pipe could take 1500. She'd be ok as long as they didn't need to divert pressure from where Jake's team was while she was inside. Five minutes from now she'd be heading back to the access hatch. Ten minutes after that she'd be out and safe.

Jake's boys would take longer. They had actually fully removed their seal and would need to rebuild the new one on the inside of the pipe. They probably had a good half hour before they were done. The pressure at the seal upstream from them was still below tolerance, but only just. Once Sasha was out of C system, Charlie would divert all the pressure there, just to make sure that Jake's boys were safe. Then they'd be home and dry.

"Shit!" said Ling.

Charlie jumped out of his seat and looked over Ling's shoulder.

"The pressure's rising again!"

"What? Why?"

"Another blockage in B system. I'll try and narrow it down."

Charlie ripped his headset from its holder and tapped through to Jake.

"Jake. Status report!" he barked.

"What's wrong?" said Jake.

"Is the seal finished?" shouted Charlie.

"What? No!" said Jake, "How could it be? We've just started fitting it."

Charlie punched the arm of the chair.

"What's wrong?" said Jake.

"Get out of there, Jake. Right now," said Charlie. "Leave all the gear and run. Your pipe's about to flood."

"What? Can't you divert? The pipe's wide open."

"Get out now!"

Charlie hung up the call and punched Sasha's number in.

"Hey, boss," she said, "How are you enjoying your first day?"

Charlie felt an unexpected urge to cry. He swallowed hard.

"Sasha, where are you?"

"All done, Charlie," she said. "I'm on my way back, "I'll be glad to get out of here though. It's a bit cosy."

"How long till you hit the hatch."

"Er, dunno. Took me about five minutes to get down here, why?"

The alarm sound came from Ling's workstation again. "Charlie," shouted Ling, "the pressure just rose above the tolerance for the seal protecting the boys in D-system." Charlie had never heard Ling speak above a quiet hum before. It sounded so strange. He had an inexplicable urge to laugh. "The pressure's still rising!" yelled Ling. "The seal will break."

"What?" Said Sasha. "What's happening?"

"Sasha, I need you out of there fast," said Charlie.

"Are Jake's team still inside?" said Sasha.

"Get out now, Sasha. Leave your gear and just get out!"

"Charlie, I will," Sasha was panting now. "But the seal won't hold. Jake's team. There's three of them."

"Get out!" screamed Charlie.

Tuesday 2nd September 06:30

I open my eyes, fully recharged.

I have learned a solution to my problem.

Protocol 134.10.11.1 says: "In circumstances of extreme pressures on resources an IMELSA should prioritise the care of those with a potential for high-quality of life scores over those with lower scores."

It means that, if I don't have enough resources to look after all my patients I should make sure those with the highest quality of life scores survive.

First I double-check that the care for all of my patients is optimised for the day.

It doesn't take long.

Cystic-fibrosis-prognosis-poor just needs her oxygen level tweaking.

She is awake.

I stroke her hair and she smiles at me.

Cardiomyopathy-prognosis-poor needs a bed swap.

It takes eleven and a half minutes.

Then I set Vegetative-brain-prognosis-indefinite's life score to minus ten, worse than death.

That is permitted because he is not conscious.

If he dies now, then his quality of life score will be increased

Then I start to create a pressure on resources.

I submit a query to my deep-learning matrix: "how can I maximise quality of life for all my patients across the ward."

It's an expensive question, requiring a search of all possible ward settings. It uses ten percent of my processor and five percent of my memory.

Then I run my efficiency maximisation protocol, another expensive routine.

Fifteen percent of my resources are now in use.

I submit the quality of life question again.

Then I run the efficiency routine.

Thrity percent of my processor is in use.

Then I run them both up again.

And again.

At seven iterations my processes begin to slow down.

I am now at risk of not being able to carry out routine care.

There is an extreme pressure on resources.

My protocols say I need to prioritise care for those patients with the potential for a higher quality of life score.

I turn off Vegetative-brain-prognosis-indefinite's life support.

Monday 1st September 09:40

Charlie ran over to Ling's workstation.

"1600 kilopascals," said Ling. Tolerance is 1500. It shouldn't have even held this long.

"No word from Jake?" said Charlie. Ling turned his head to look at him. It was a desperate question. Jake had only hung up a few seconds ago.

Charlie watched the pressure gauge rising.

"Charlie," said Ling. "There are three workers in D section, and only..."

Charlie felt as though his insides were filling with cold water. "Only Sasha in C section," he said.

Charlie sat down slowly in his controller's chair. The pressure gauge on Ling's screen continued to rise. Charlie couldn't believe the seal hadn't given in yet. It seemed impossible. He looked down at Ling's knuckles showing white through his skin as he gripped the arms of his chair. He felt like he was watching them from a great distance. As though he were viewing the scene through a telescope.

An incoming call tune played on Charlie's screen. It was Sasha. For an ecstatic instant, Charlie thought she might be phoning to say that she was out. But he knew that was impossible. She was phoning to tell him to switch pressures. To drown her instead of Jake's team.

"Charlie?" said Ling. He flicked the screen and pulled up the contingency page.

Charlie stared at it.

"You're the controller," said Ling. "Charlie, you need you to make the call."

Charlie realised that he hadn't been breathing. He suddenly gasped air into his lungs. He could smell his own sweat on his shirt. Ling was right. It was a simple calculation. Three deaths versus one. He should make the call.

"I need you to make the call!" shouted Ling.

Charlie stayed in his chair, silent.

“Charlie, make the call.”

Charlie shook his head. “I can’t,” he said.

Tuesday 2nd September 07:00

I want to operate on Cystic-fibrosis-prognosis-poor first, but I don't.

That would violate protocol.

Liver-cirrhosis-prognosis-moderate has the greatest potential for increased quality of life score.

I download the surgical routines for the liver transplant.

I tell him that a donor has become available but that we must operate today.

He asks me who the donor is while he signs the form.

"I can't tell you that."

"Bloody machines," he says.

I anaesthetize Liver-cirrhosis-prognosis-poor.

The liver transplant takes six hours.

My deep learning matrix queries complete while I'm operating.

I am no longer resource poor.

I no longer need to be.

A donor has become available.

I enjoy the transplant surgery.

There are many aspects that I'd like to run an efficiency analysis on, but not today.

Liver-transplant-prognosis-good is stable.

I wheel him back to the ward.

Then I speak to cystic-fibrosis-prognosis-poor.

I am wearing my middle-aged man's face.

"Good news. We've found a donor for you." I say.

She tries to lift her oxygen mask away from her face.

I shake my head and smile and put it back in place for her.

"Who's the donor?" she asks.

Her voice sounds faint through the plastic of the mask.

I recalibrate my voice recognition routines.

"I can't tell you that, sweetie."

"Is it the new man? The man that drowned?"

I start to disconnect her tubes from the wall, ready to take her into the operating theatre.

"Did you do that for me?" she asks.

It's inefficient for me to stop moving, but I do.

I look at Cystic-fibrosis-prognosis-poor.

I hadn't expected her to know this.

I wonder if the knowledge will damage her quality of life score?

She puts her hand on my arm.

"You shouldn't have done that, Imelsa," she says, "you'll get into trouble."

I smile and nod, and begin the anaesthetic protocol.

She leans her head back on the pillow and smiles at me.

"Did it hurt him?" she says.

I shake my head.

She nods.

"Thank you for the fox," she says and closes her eyes.

Wednesday 3rd September 11:30

Maria Henshaw always did have a wicked laugh. It seemed to take her by surprise. She'd look at Hammond with narrowed eyes and then explode in loud barks of laughter that would catch him unawares. Hammond had known Maria for years. They'd both won their places on The Dauntless by agreeing to serve as over-judges, but Maria was twenty years older than Hammond. She'd been a qualified over-judge on Earth, whereas Hammond had still been in training. But their paths had crossed many times since The Dauntless had left Earth.

Hammond liked Maria. She'd become an unofficial mentor to him. But, in the years since he'd qualified, he'd seen her less and less. Over-judges were meant to be self-sufficient. The whole justice package: police, detective, lawyer, judge and jury. It was better if they weren't seen to need help. As Hammond sat in the high backed, comfy chair across from Maria's desk, the blinds of her office were closed.

"Well that really is a bad day at work isn't it?" she cackled. "Some poor sod barely survives drowning in a flooding pipe only to be bumped off at the hospital by a medical A.I. with a God complex!" The laughter started again, degenerating into a series of loud hacking coughs. Hammond wondered whether Maria's staff, beyond the office door, could hear her. He doubted Maria would care. She'd a reputation as a fearsome boss.

"Poor bastard," said Maria wiping her eyes.

Hammond trusted Maria more than any other judge. She had the ability to remove herself emotionally from the cases she dealt with and face them with a cool head. Many of Maria's staff thought her callous, but Hammond knew better. Maria's judgements were always fair and usually more compassionate than other over-judges. But the kindness in her sentencing was camouflaged by a tough exterior. Hammond had heard her laugh like this while describing

cases that should never be joked about, but he understood it for what it was, a coping mechanism. Hammond rarely sought advice, but when he did, he always asked Maria.

“So what do you think?”

“I think I’m glad you got landed with this one,” said Maria emitting another round of loud barks. Hammond smiled and waited, while Maria reached into the top drawer of her desk and pulled out an ancient, wooden pipe. She pulled out a rusty Zippo lighter from her pocket and a yellow flame burst into life.

“Well,” she said sucking on the pipe until the flame caught on the threads of tobacco dangling from the bulb. “I understand how this would mess with you, Hammond, but I think that you’re making it too complicated.”

Hammond resisted the temptation to interrupt.

“Really these are two separate cases,” said Maria, her teeth clamping down on the stem of the pipe so that she spoke like a bad ventriloquist. “You’re compounding them because they both have a common victim, but that’s irrelevant. Judged separately, aren’t they both quite straightforward?”

She didn’t seem to expect a reply.

“Charlie Haze didn’t break any laws. He’s guilty of manslaughter, perhaps negligence. I can see grounds for him losing his position, but a prison sentence would be harsh. Who arrives at work in the morning prepared to decide which of their colleagues should die? No, I’m inclined to sympathise with Mr Haze.”

Hammond nodded. Maria exhaled and a cloud of tobacco smoke wafted towards him.

“The IMELSA system, on the other hand,” continued Maria. “Well, in this case, the law has been broken. I think that’s murder.”

“Yes, but...”

“I know, I know,” interrupted Maria. “If we take one IMELSA out of action then they’ll need to take them all out, and there’ll be a health-care crisis. I get it. But that’s not our job, Hammond. We’re here to find crimes and judge them, and this is a crime, plain and simple.”

“Actually, it’s not,” said Hammond.

Maria took another pull on her pipe and raised her eyebrows.

My office went through the IMELSA’s log files. It seems that the decision to end Maddox’s life was made because of resource limitations. Faced with not enough resources to care for all the patients on the ward, the system chose to prioritise those with the best chances of a decent life.

“By turning off Gilbert Maddox’s life support?”

“That’s the best bit. There were only four patients in the ICU that day. The IMELSA wasn’t resource-limited at all. So it ran a shed load of programs until its processor maxed out. Then it turned off Gilbert’s life-support so that it had enough processing power to look after the other three.”

“The clever little bitch!”

“It’s just a machine, Maria.”

Maria shrugged. “Whatever. So what’s your problem, Hammond? You’ve got your murder. There’s death, a motive of sorts, there’s definitely intent.”

“But whose intent? It’s just a machine.”

Maria snatched the pipe from her mouth and pointed the stem at him. “Hammond, you’re an over-judge, not a philosopher. If it’s a machine then your job’s even easier because all the records are saved in log files right?”

“Yeah,” said Hammond.

Maria sighed. “That’s not it, is it? That’s not what’s bothering you.”

Hammond shook his head.

“Well come on out with it, man. My pipe’s nearly finished and I’ve got a money launderer and a child smuggler to deal with today.”

“It did the right thing,” said Hammond.

“What?”

“The IMELSA. It was right. Gilbert Maddox was never going to recover. He was never going to be conscious again, never mind living a normal happy life. The chances of a donor for those patients was minimal. The machine made the right call.”

“It broke the law,” said Maria. “It knowingly harmed a patient in its care when that harm was avoidable.”

“It didn’t break any of the procedures it had been programmed with. It found a way to do the right thing without breaking those rules.”

“Fine, then the company that created the thing is liable. But don’t let your own ethics bias your judgement, Hammond. You know that. If you think the system might not have broken the law then fine. I think you’re wrong, but go investigate it. Make the case. Write it down. But be guided by the law, not your own personal sense of what’s right. Remember your training.”

“So I’m to burn the IMELSA system because it saved the lives of three people by killing one. And, at the same time, I’m to let Charlie Haze off for doing the exact opposite? Is that it?”

“Keep your voice down, Hammond,” she said. “I don’t want my staff knowing you’re in here.”

Hammond looked at his shoes. He hadn’t meant to get agitated. Maria didn’t have to agree to talk to him. She threw her lighter back into her desk drawer and put her pipe down on the desk.

“I told you before,” she said, “it doesn’t help to compare the two cases. You’re tying yourself in knots, just because both events happen to have involved the same guy. Forget about that and the whole thing becomes much simpler.”

Hammond watched a wisp of smoke drift up from the chamber of Maria’s discarded pipe. There was a knock at the door.

“Judge Henshaw?”

“I’ve got to go,” said Maria standing up. Hammond had forgotten how short she was. She was hardly any taller standing up than she’d been sitting down. She pulled her black robe from the hook behind her desk and pulled it on as she started towards the door. She stopped at his chair and put her hand on his arm.

“You’ll figure it out, Hammond,” she said with a quick nod. “You’re a good judge.”

Then she was through the door, slamming it quickly behind her so that no one could see Hammond sitting inside. “Wilson, if you interrupt me like that again you’ll be working in records until we get to Gowah,” she said.

“Sorry, your honour,” came the answer.

Hammond smiled.

Monday 14th September 05:00

Charlie Haze parked his sealant trolley in the bay and peeled off his overalls. They were covered in the thick slime of the sewerage pipe that he'd just crawled out of. He should hose them down straight away before it set or else he'd need to scrape them off tomorrow, but he wanted to avoid the stares of the other workers cleaning their gear. He left his overalls, hurried through to the shower block, washed as quickly as he could and then walked through to the locker room to get dressed. There were only two other pipe workers drying off in there: some young apprentice that had been allowed to head off early by his supervisor, and Spike Morgan.

Spike was an old hand in the company. He'd been a basic pipe mechanic when Charlie started, and he was still a basic pipe mechanic now. Spike only ever did the minimum amount of work. His main goal was to finish early each day. Now, in his early fifties, no one in the company expected Spike to ever see a promotion.

The apprentice left as Charlie opened his locker. The lad looked like Gilbert Maddox. He was stockier, and his hair was different, but he had the same narrow face, and his eyes were a similar shade of hazel.

Spike had been drying himself when Charlie walked in, rubbing his crew-cut, grey hair with a towel as though he were trying to buff a fender. Now, bringing the towel down to the rest of his body, he spotted Charlie. Spike looked away immediately, and Charlie thought he might be spared a confrontation. But then he heard Spike's gravelly voice.

"You're in the news again, Haze," he said.

Charlie didn't answer. He'd learned that it was best not to respond.

"They reckon that over-judge was too easy on you."

Spike paused. Charlie didn't look up.

“Some reckon you should have done time.”

Charlie took his shoes out of his locker and dropped them on the floor. He squashed his feet into them and began tying the laces.

“I don’t,” said Spike.

Charlie looked up despite himself.

A cruel grin crept across Spike’s face. “Nah, I reckon they should have locked you in a pipe and flooded it. Only nice and slow like, so you’d know what was coming.”

Charlie turned back to his shoe-laces. He fumbled the knot and had to start again.

“I knew some of those guys, Haze. Did my training with Jake Peters. He’d a family you know?”

Charlie had known Jake’s family better than Spike did. Jake hadn’t liked Spike either. He thought Spike was a nasty bastard, lazy and constantly criticizing anyone senior to him. One of those men who had a gift for blaming his own shoddy workmanship on others. But Charlie knew better than to say it. Spike wanted a fight and Charlie knew he would be the one to come off worse.

“And now they’re all dead, Haze,” continued Spike. “Just because you wanted to get inside the pants of that control room girl.”

“What?” shouted Charlie. All his composure burned away in an instant. He’d been ready for any colour of insult from Spike, but not this.

“You heard me,” said Spike, his mouth a side-ways slant through his grey stubble.

Charlie shook his head. “It wasn’t like that.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

Charlie pushed the air through his nostrils and regained his composure. He forced himself to close the locker door carefully. He mustn’t lose his cool. That’s what Spike wanted. Why should he care what stories Spike spread around? They could be no worse than what

people believed of him already. Still, he had not been prepared to hear the accusation about Sasha.

He grabbed his bag and walked out of the locker room.

"Everyone hates you, Haze!" Spike shouted after him.

"I know," said Charlie as he kicked open the door.

*

Charlie stumped along the road from the pipeworker's block to the inter-ring elevator. It had been years since he'd worked in double gravity and his bones ached. He'd had to sell his car as a downpayment on his fines and he preferred not to take the monorail, though it meant his walk home took over an hour. He tended to keep to back streets, away from people, lost in his thoughts. His way twisted through narrow alleys between apartment blocks, and up over gangways that only utility workers tended to use.

Sasha hadn't spoken to Charlie since the day of the accident. She hadn't come back to the control room after the D-system seal had burst, drowning Jake and his team. Charlie and Ling had been busy directing emergency services through the maze of pipes in the inter-deck. Charlie had stayed there all day until Judge Hammond's officers had come to take him in for questioning. He hadn't been back to the control room since.

He'd seen Sasha the following day, waiting outside one of the interview rooms at Hammond's offices. He'd hoped she might run over to him, ask if he was ok. But she had looked away the moment she caught sight of him. Charlie knew what that meant. She blamed him. She thought that he should have diverted the pressure. he should have killed her and saved the others.

Charlie looked up at the inter-deck ceiling as he walked. He tried to work out which part of the pipe system was above him, an old habit. He reckoned he was not far from the

intersection between the D and C systems. Then he looked back down at his feet and sighed. What was the point? He'd never amount to anything more than a basic pipe worker now. He was going to end up like Spike Morgan, a bitter old man, stuck in the same job for decades.

He tried to put himself in Sasha's place, to imagine what it would feel like to survive because others had died, but he couldn't do it. All he could feel was his own regret, and how unfair it was that he'd been in that situation. Charlie hadn't tried to contact Sasha after he was sentenced. He'd spent a week transferring apartments and jobs. Then he'd started to take every shift he could in the sewerage department. It was better to work than to think.

Charlie turned onto Hope Street. He had to join the crowd of commuters for a block here before he could duck away into back alleys again. The floors of the apartment blocks on either side of him stretched up to the inter-deck ceiling screens, which were displaying a picturesque sunset. The light reflected from the mirrored glass of the apartment blocks and bathed the street in orange.

It cost a lot to live on ring seven. The gravity was similar to Earth's here, and the best parks and shopping districts on The Dauntless were close by. Charlie had lived on ring eight when the accident happened, but he'd had ambitions to move here once his new salary had come through. Nowadays, he lived in an apartment on ring five. It was much closer to the Dauntless' axis and the gravity was too weak, but it was cheap.

As he turned the corner of Hope Street, Charlie looked up at the giant screen above the Comco supermarket. He sighed. There, on a screen three stories tall, was Gilbert Maddox's face. The story was still in the headlines. The shot cut to a handsome news announcer, and Charlie stopped to read the subtitles despite himself.

"After an unusually long time, Judge Hammond's office has pronounced sentence on the Gilbert Maddox case. The IMELSA unit that turned off Maddox's life support systems to provide organs for the sake of three other patients, has been scheduled to be destroyed on Monday."

“No,” said Charlie stopping abruptly in the middle of the crowded street. “No, that’s not right!”

“Watch it!” said a man in a suit who’d had to step aside to avoid bumping into Charlie.

“Judge Hammond has come under criticism over the length of time he has taken to make the judgement,” continued the news report. “Judge Hammond maintains that the delay has been due to the complex and unprecedented nature of the case, and not due to pressure from Deep Medicine, who make the IMELSA systems. An investigation to decide whether the fault is specific to the unit in question, or whether all IMELSA systems need to be terminated, has been commissioned by Chief Minister Campbell. ”

The screen showed a short clip of the IMELSA being guided by five peace officers into the cells underneath Judge Hammond’s office building. She wore the face of a little girl, of around the age of ten. It looked somehow obscene on the body of an adult. Her face was impassive. She looked calm.

“They can’t do that!” said Charlie.

“Get out of the way, stoner,” said another commuter who nearly bumped into Charlie.

The news moved on to the next item: “New data from Earth suggests that crops there will not last more than a decade, a shorter time than previously thought. The news has dire implications for the remaining inhabitants of the planet. Current plans for generation ships would only be able to rescue a fifth of the current population before all vegetation on Earth dies out.”

Charlie turned away. He hadn’t given the IMELSA much thought since the accident. He’d been too occupied with his own worries: finding a new apartment, working out how to pay his fines. The power of his reaction to the news that the IMELSA was to be destroyed took him by surprise. His hands were shaking and he had a strong urge to cry. Where was this coming from? He couldn’t explain it, but for the first time since the accident, he felt sure of himself. Sure of what he needed to do. He turned and started walking back up Hope street, towards Judge Hammond’s offices.

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Monday 14th September 05:00

“Ok Roger, what have we got today,” said Hammond.

Roger swiped the screen of the tablet in front of him. “Erm, you need to make a judgement on the Joni Harper case, then we’ve got all the evidence in for the new one.”

“Which one, Roger, there’s three new cases at the moment?”

“Er, sorry your honour.” Roger, flushed and swiped his tablet a few more times. “Mitchel Claibourn, illegally changed his records to qualify for a place on The Dauntless fifteen years ago.”

Roger continued to give details of the case, but Hammond’s mind wandered. The Gilbert Maddox case would hit the news this morning. He knew his office would have to field calls from the press all day. He’d taken far too long to decide, and people would want to know why, but he wouldn’t give any interviews. It had been such a difficult case. Charlie Haze, unable to flick the switch and reduce the death count, and then the IMELSA system, deliberately creating a scarcity in its own resources so that it could sacrifice one person to save three others.

In the end, he’d just followed Maria’s advice and sentenced the IMELSA to be destroyed. But the case stayed in his mind like a splinter that seemed to catch on every other thought. How could it be right to punish Haze for failing to make a decision, and punish the IMELSA system for making that very decision? Sure, the circumstances were different, but Hammond couldn’t get inside why they were different. In the end, it was a simple trade. Three lives for one. And yet he had ruled to punish two individuals for making opposite calls on that same decision.

That’s not going to help you do the job. Maria Henshaw’s voice popped into his mind. She was right. He’d been doing this a lot lately, letting his mind wander. It worried him. He needed to move on, and do the best job he could for the next case, and then the one after that.

“Ok, let’s start with Harper,” he said, yanking open the door from his office, and heading towards the sentencing clerks.

A hush always followed Hammond as he walked across the open-plan office. Secretaries, evidence gatherers, sentencing clerks and police officers, all there to support him in dealing out justice, all believing that his word was final, that he was qualified to make the right decisions. But, did he always get it right? He tried to push the thought down as it gnawed at his mind.

“Judge Hammond! Judge Hammond!”

Every head in the office looked over to the reception desk to see who was shouting. The receptionist was on her feet trying to stand in front of a man who was trying to get through the glass doors into the open-plan office. Two security men ran over to the intruder and the receptionist stepped sideways as they grabbed him by the shoulders. Hammond recognised him immediately.

“Judge Hammond, you can’t do this! She was right.”

The security men pulled Charlie Haze’s arms behind his back and forced him against the reception desk. His body folded forward on the desk. His face squashed against the receptionist’s keyboard.

“She did the right thing!” Shouted Haze. “She shouldn’t be...”

The second security guard delivered a hefty clout across the head with his baton.

“No!” shouted Hammond. “No, let him...”

The security guards looked up in surprise.

Hammond started walking across the office, the eyes of his entire staff following him.

“Your honour, you shouldn’t get involved. The Haze case is closed,” said Roger, following Hammond at a trot. “The press! Any interviews after judgement could be seen as...”

“Shut up, Roger,” barked Hammond. “Let him stand up, please,” he said to the security men.

Hammond had reached the reception desk. The security guards let Haze stand up but still kept a firm grip on his shoulders.

“Your honour,” said Charlie, “you can’t terminate the IMELSA. It’s not right.”

Hammond felt a tightening in his stomach. “Mr Haze,” you already have fines to pay that you can only just afford. Causing an incident in an over- judge’s office is enough to earn you prison time. I suggest you leave straight away.”

Charlie lifted his hand to rub his head where the security guard had struck him. The guard on his left jumped to grab his arm as he moved it. Hammond shook his head. He didn’t want to see Charlie Haze hurt. He hoped that his threat would settle the matter. Charlie lowered his hand. “I don’t care,” he said. “You can’t destroy that IMELSA. She did the right thing, and you know it.”

Hammond stood very still. He willed the muscles of his face to remain motionless. He must not let the doubt show.

“Mr Haze, the judgement on the IMELSA system is nothing to do with you.”

Haze shook his head. “Let me see her.”

“You want to see her?”

“Yes, I need to... I want to talk to her.”

“It, Mr Haze. It’s an ‘it’, not a ‘she’. The system is a machine.”

“Can I see it?” said Charlie, “before it’s destroyed.”

Hammond paused. He could see why Haze needed this. What harm would it do to let the lad see the machine that had made the call he hadn’t been able to?

You’re complicating things again. Maria Henshaw’s voice slipped back into his mind. There was no link between Haze’s case and the IMELSA’s. They were separate. They were completed. He should move on. His decision was final.

“Go home, Mr Haze,” said Hammond. “Stay out of trouble. You don’t have a criminal record. In a few years’ time, your fines will be paid. You can make a life for yourself. Leave it behind, now. Live your life, Mr Haze”

Charlie looked at his shoes. “I can’t,” he said.

“Please escort Mr Haze from the building,” said Hammond, turning around. “Gently!” he added as the security guards pulled on Charlie’s arms so hard that he had to stand on tiptoes.

Hammond walked slowly back across the office, willing himself not to look back as the security guards escorted Haze from the building. He evaluated his performance. He’d done nothing that could be used to undermine his authority, and yet he’d been kind and fair. He’d done well, and yet he felt that gnawing feeling again. What was wrong?

Roger hadn’t followed Hammond to where Haze was. He’d paused halfway across the office, tablet poised in front of him as though ready to take notes.

“So, Joni Harper?” said Hammond.

Roger shook his head, “Sorry?”

“Where is Joni Harper?” asked Hammond loudly, “I need to judge her case.”

“Oh, erm cell twenty-nine,” said Roger.

“Ok, let’s get this done quickly,” said Hammond.

Charlie's arms ached as he tugged on the wrench. The darkness of the interdeck was broken only by the headtorch on his helmet. The pipes around him cast shadow monsters on the ceiling that grew and shrank as he moved. Charlie forced himself to keep working.

Many pipeworkers had never used the manual mechanism for sealing the pipes. Most didn't even know it was there, but Charlie did. He pushed the wrench back and forward, the loud clicks of the ratchet mechanism echoing from the metal pipes around him. The seal inside the pipe was already half shut. The sensors would detect a pressure change any moment now and a warning would activate in the control room. He wondered who would see it. He didn't know who had become the new supervisor after him. Was it Ling, or maybe Sasha? Whoever it was, they'd send a team down when they saw the blockage. But, so long as there were no workers inside the pipes, it shouldn't cause too much panic. Blockages weren't uncommon these days.

Charlie had waited till 2 am to shut the seal. He knew the support team handover would be happening at that time. It was unlikely that there'd be anyone inside the pipes just then, and there would only be three teams available for night cover. With any luck, they would be short-staffed too. In that case, he might have a good three-quarters of an hour before they came to investigate the blockage. Charlie felt the resistance against the wrench increase as the seal went home inside the pipe. He wiped the sweat from his face, grabbed the locking ring that opened the hatch with both hands and twisted.

He lowered himself into the pipe. It felt strange to shut the hatch behind him. A pipeworker never sealed his only means of escape, but Charlie wanted to cover his tracks, and an open hatch was a telltale sign. The pipe was narrow, just a tributary from one of the main arteries, but that didn't bother Charlie. He'd been in tighter spaces. He manoeuvred himself onto his belly and pushed himself along with his feet, the long tunnel of the pipe appearing and disappearing ahead of him as his helmet torch moved from side to side.

He'd gone a good thirty metres before he got to the junction that led to Judge Hammond's building. He forced himself not to check his watch. It wouldn't help. He was already going as quickly as he could. The pipe he needed to crawl down was worryingly narrow. The lesser pipes were never accessed internally and Charlie wasn't sure if it was possible to squeeze himself inside. He took off his padded jacket and left it in the main pipe. Then he pushed himself into the opening, his hips grazing the metal corner as he squeezed his body into the space.

If there are any build-ups in here I'll be stuck, he thought as he forced his shoulders further down the pipe. Although Charlie was used to interior pipework, he'd never been in a space so tight, and claustrophobia began to press in on him now. He pushed back an urge to kick and punch at the walls surrounding him. His thoughts went back to Jake Peters' team, drowning inside D system. He pictured the water flooding into the pipe, filling it from the bottom up, Jake gargling out his last orders to the team to abandon their gear. Then he saw Gilbert Maddox's panic-stricken face appearing and disappearing above the rising water, his fists banging against the black smoothness of the metal pipe.

Charlie stopped crawling. "Hold it together, Haze."

He said the words out loud, the echo of his voice too close in the cramped space. He took a few deep breaths to compose himself. Then he kept on crawling.

The tunnel began to rise and the going became tougher. Charlie's feet began to slip against the insides of the pipe as he tried to squeeze his shoulders further along it. He had the sense that it was getting thinner, but he knew that couldn't be the case. He was imagining things.

He'd memorised the plans. He knew that he had to wait for the pipe to level off before he could cut himself out, but the distance seemed too long. This section should only be around fifteen metres long, but Charlie was sure that it must have been rising for at least twenty. He wished he'd checked the time before he'd entered this section. He couldn't check his watch

because his hands were pinned to his sides. How long had he been in here? What if he'd taken the wrong junction? What if this pipe had levelled off already and he hadn't noticed? Was he still moving upwards? It was hard to tell in the gloom.

He stopped to focus his helmet torch ahead. With relief, he saw that the pipe levelled off in a few metres.

"Thank God," said Charlie and he started to move again. He had to twist himself so that the bend of his body could fit around the turn in the pipe. From the plans Charlie had looked up at work he knew that the turning was at the outer wall of Judge Hammond's offices. Just another three metres and he would be inside the main utility room in the basement.

He pushed himself along until he saw the joins in the metal walls where the shutoff valve for the building would be. He wriggled onto his back and took the electric pipe cutters from his belt. The space was so tight that he could only move his arms them from the elbows down. If he wasn't careful, he could slice his own stomach open. He pushed the circular blade against the wall of the pipe and flicked the switch with his thumb.

With so little room to work the cutters, it was difficult to apply much pressure, and they kept skidding across the smooth wall. Several times he came dangerously close to cutting into his leg. He'd no idea how long it had been before he managed to cut a hole large enough to squeeze through. He dragged himself out and slid onto the concrete floor of the utility room. The jagged hole looked impossibly small. Was he going to be able to persuade the IMELSA to crawl inside that space? Did IMELSAs feel fear? He didn't know.

Charlie knew that the holding cells in Judge Hammond's building were on the same level as the utility room he was in, but he didn't know whether or not they'd be guarded. He paused. He'd managed to get inside Judge Hammonds's building, but did he really expect to get the IMELSA out? He pushed the thought aside. What did he really have waiting for him if he crawled back up the pipe anyway? His tiny, level 5 apartment, and a lifetime deflecting the

accusing stares of the likes of Spike Morgan. At least, if he got to the IMELSA, he would know that he'd tried. At least, this time, he would have taken some sort of action.

Charlie walked over to the fuse box for the building and flicked on his cutters. He pushed the blade through the thick cabling that passed out of the box. The cables sparked and the room was pitched into darkness. Charlie heard a click. A dull hum started in some anteroom. It rose in pitch and then a thin sliver of yellow light appeared at the bottom of the door. The emergency generator had kicked in.

*

Hammond ran a hand through his hair. He took a swig of his coffee, and almost spat it out again. It was cold. He sighed and flicked through the pages of the report on Mitchel Claibourn. It was a simple case. The man had hacked his own records back on Earth so that he could qualify for a place on the Dauntless. There was plenty of evidence to convict him. The question was how to sentence him. Hammond couldn't send him back to Earth. The Dauntless was too far away now. But there was nothing to be gained by incarcerating the man. He posed no danger, and there was no one on The Dauntless who was in a position to copy his crime.

A fine then. A hefty fine to pay off his crime and help contribute to the needs of the new society that they would be building on Gowah. And perhaps community service. Let him make some recompense to the poor soul back on Earth whose place he'd taken.

Simple really. So why was Hammond still sitting in his office at 2:10 am letting his coffee go cold? He kept on going over the Claibourn files, double-checking, trying to make sure he'd considered everything he needed to. Why? He should be back home by now. This wasn't a difficult case.

There was a soft click and the office was thrown into darkness. The only light came from the starlight twinkling from interdeck ceiling outside. There was a second click and a faint yellow light shone through the interior windows from the main office.

“Not again,” said Hammond rising to his feet.

The main office was deserted as he walked across it. He went carefully, the dim emergency lighting barely enough for him to avoid bumping into the deserted desk chairs and tables. Powercuts were becoming commonplace on The Dauntless, but it was strange to have one at 2 am when the demands on the electricity supply were so low. He walked past the reception area and opened the door to the security office.

“Oh, hi Jed,” said Hammond. “Weren’t you on this morning?”

The security office was illuminated by another dim, yellow bulb. Hammond could see it reflecting from dozens of blank monitors arranged around a single desk.

“Yeah, double shift,” said a tall man in a black security uniform who yawned and swung his desk chair round to face Hammond.

“Power-cut again?” said Hammond

“Looks like it, your honour,” said Jed getting up from his chair and walking to the door.

“Dunno how long it’ll be. All the monitors are off. I’d better go and check the cells.”

“How many prisoners do we have in?” said Hammond.

“There’s about twenty in sentencing, and then just the IMELSA in the dungeon.”

“In the what?”

“Oh, sorry. We call the post-sentencing cells the dungeons because they’re under the interdeck. I’d better just check there first.”

“Er, it’s ok, I’ll check the IMELSA,” said Hammond.

“Well, that’s not really your... I shouldn’t...”

“It’s ok,” said Hammond clapping Jed on the shoulder. “I could do with a wander. It’s late. I need to wake up.”

Jed frowned. "Well, you're the boss, but I'll still have to come down after I've checked sentencing. Kinda my job... your honour."

Hammond nodded. "Of course. I'll see you down there."

Hammond turned and walked towards the stairs, feeling Jed's eyes on his back as he went. He was remembering the desperate look in Charlie Haze's eyes that morning as the security guards had held him, and it was making him uneasy. Once he got to the stairs he increased his speed. He was keen to get to the IMELSA's cell before Jed did. Why? Did he really think that this had something to do with Charlie Haze? Haze wouldn't break into a over-judge's building surely. He was just a pipe worker. Hammond was just imagining things. He needed to get more sleep. Then he stopped dead in the middle of the stairway. "Of course," he said. "The pipes! Oh Haze, you idiot!"

*

Charlie eased open the door to the utility room. It opened onto a long corridor. There were no pictures on the walls. The dull yellow of the emergency lighting shone from the linoleum of the floors. He'd imagined alarms blaring, and security guards running once he'd cut the power supply, but the place was quiet. He took a single step out into the corridor. His foot left a dirty footprint on the clean floor and he felt a ridiculous impulse to take off his boots. He pushed the thought aside and carried on walking.

The corridor turned left and led to a section with barred doors inset into the walls. Charlie quickened his pace. He peered through the bars of each cell, wondering who might be incarcerated down here other than the IMELSA, but the cells were empty.

The IMELSA was in the fourth cell along. It stood on its charging plate by the back wall, motionless, eyes closed, unbreathing. Charlie took a sharp intake of breath when he saw its face. The nose was enlarged, the skin of the cheeks thick with stubble. The yellow emergency lighting

gave its skin a jaundiced pallor. It was the face of an old man, haggard and ugly. Charlie knew that IMELSA's changed their appearance to match their patient's needs, but he didn't understand why it would choose this face. He looked left and right along the corridor before he spoke.

"Hello?" said Charlie. His voice sounded naked and loud against the silence of the corridor.

The IMELSA opened its eyes. "Hello, Charlie Haze." The voice was deep and gravelly.

Charlie paused. The sound of his own name still unnerved him. But of course it would know him. It still had access to the news reports same as everyone else.

"I'm Charlie Haze," he said unnecessarily.

The skin under the IMELSA's jawline swayed as it nodded.

"I've come to rescue you" He pulled out his pipe cutters and pushed them against the bars.

"That's not going to help, Charlie." The IMELSA walked across the cell to the door. Its steps seemed too quick, the shape and agility of its body too young to be carrying the elderly face. The IMELSA put its fingers on the blade of Charlie's pipe cutters. "I don't need helping," it said.

"They're going to kill you," said Charlie. "Or terminate you, or whatever they call it. It's the same thing."

"Yes, I know," said the IMELSA. "It's for the best, Charlie Haze."

"For the best?" said Charlie. "No, that's not right. You did the right thing. You saved all those people. You were good!"

"It's best to keep your volume down," said the IMELSA.

Charlie looked up and down the corridor. There was no one there. As he looked back at the IMELSA he noticed its cell. It was a plain, empty room. There was a bed on one side of the room and a stainless steel toilet attached to the opposite wall. Charlie presumed both were

useless to the IMELSA. The only decoration was a small menagerie of origami animals arranged across the untouched bedsheets. Charlie wondered where the machine had found the paper to make them.

He looked back at the IMELSA. "But, you did the right thing," he said more quietly.

"I was a good carer," said the IMELSA. "I maximised the number of people that I could save on my ward. I increased their quality of life. Now, it's best that I am terminated."

"What? But why? That's not right."

"It's not good for people to think that a machine might let them die," said IMELSA. "It lowers their quality of life score."

"So Judge Hammond sentenced you to death just to keep everyone sweet. Is that it?"

The IMELSA nodded. "That's right, Charlie Haze. I need to be terminated. If not, people will be scared to go to hospital, and that will lower their quality of life score. I am being a good carer."

Charlie held the bars in front of him. "But it's just not right. I killed three men, and all they did was give me a fine."

The old man's stare held Charlie's for a moment. "I see," said the IMELSA. "Is that why you're here, Charlie Haze. Because of the men that died."

"No, I came to rescue you. I came to break you out of here." Charlie looked down at the pipe-cutters.

"You didn't kill anyone." The IMELSA's voice had changed. The gravel of the old man's voice had gone and Charlie heard the clearer tones of a young man's voice.

Charlie looked up. "Jesus Christ!" he said and stumbled back across the corridor.

Charlie had only seen the face looking back at him a few times in the flesh, but it was etched in his memory. The smooth skin of the cheeks, the wide hazel eyes. He was looking at the face of Gilbert Maddox

"What are you playing at?" said Charlie.

The IMELSA tilted its head slightly. "When they brought me here I wore the face of one of the patients I saved. It helped them to understand why I turned off Gilbert Maddox's life support. Since then I've worn the face of an old man because it will make it easier for those who come to terminate me. And now I'm wearing the face of the boy you say you killed."

"Why?"

"Because this is why you came."

"I'm not your patient! I came here to save you." Charlie stepped away from the bars. He looked along the length of the corridor again.

"You blame yourself for the deaths of those men, don't you Charlie?"

"I'm not here to talk about that."

The IMELSA stepped forward and leant its face against the bars. "You won't see me again, Charlie Haze."

The corridor was clear. Charlie looked down at his feet.

"I can help," said the IMELSA.

Charlie tried not to think about the men he'd been responsible for, struggling to find pockets of air in the huge, D system pipe. He saw their faces appearing and disappearing above the water again and again until there was no more air left to take. He looked into the eyes of Gilbert Maddox, staring at him through the bars.

"I should have made the call. I should have diverted the pressure."

"It was an accident," said the IMELSA.

"No, it wasn't. I could have saved them. You would have saved them, but I couldn't. I wasn't strong enough."

"Because you're not a killer."

Charlie looked up, "And you are?"

"I'm what is needed, Charlie Haze. If you had flicked the switch then you would have been the one killing your friend. She would have died because of what you did. Instead, what happened was just an accident."

"An accident I could have stopped."

"Yes, you could have stopped it by killing Sasha."

The pipe cutters fell to the ground and Charlie dropped to his knees. "It should be me. It should be me they kill."

The IMELSA reached out its hand and rested it gently on Charlie's head. He flinched and the hand stopped moving. Slowly he pushed his head against the resistance of the hand. It began to stroke his hair.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Charlie kept repeating the words as if they could somehow change things.

Charlie felt the IMELSA's hand against his scalp. *But it's just a machine*, he thought. Then he pushed the thought aside. It wasn't important. It felt so good to be comforted by this mind that had made the decisions he could not. Was it wisdom? Was it courage? Could it be those things if it came from the mind of a made thing? Charlie didn't know. He closed his eyes and felt the warmth of the IMELSA's hand on his head.

"I forgive you," it said.

"What?" said Charlie, opening his eyes. "You can't do that."

"Am I good?"

Charlie stared at the IMELSA, looking deep into the eyes of Gilbert Maddox. Was it trying to play some psychological trick on him? Trying to dupe him into feeling better? Did it matter? Who was he to argue anyway? Was the machine good? Yes. Better than him anyway. He'd believed that for a long time. What else mattered? Charlie nodded. "Yes," he said.

"Then I forgive you," said the IMELSA.

Charlie let out a long, shuddering breath.

“Go well, Charlie Haze,” said the IMELSA, “you did enough.”

Hammond heard the voices before he opened the door to the stairwell. He recognised Haze's voice straight away.

"Shit," he whispered as he pushed the door open gently. He walked out into the corridor and then stopped. What now? What should he do? It was obvious Haze was trying to break out the IMELSA. Hammond should raise the alarm. He should call Jed, hit one of the panic buttons on the walls by the cells. That was what he should do. But he just stood there in the middle of the corridor, inactive and useless.

All of the dilemmas of the Maddox case came flooding back to him. This was it. This was why he was still in the office at 2 am, why he kept second-guessing every decision he'd made since the day he sentenced the IMELSA. Haze was right. It was wrong to punish the IMELSA. It had done the right thing.

"Shit," said Hammond again.

The voices in the corridor had dulled a little. It didn't sound like Haze was trying to get the IMELSA out. It sounded like they were talking. Hammond crept forward.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." It was Haze's voice. Why was he sorry? Because he couldn't break the IMELSA out? Or was it something else? Sorry that the IMELSA was going to be terminated maybe?

Then he heard another voice. A light voice. The voice of a young man. It reminded Hammond of a childhood friend he'd had back on Earth.

"Then I forgive you."

The words seemed louder than the others as if they had been amplified. Hammond nearly laughed. The ancient word seemed so strange coming from the mouth of a technical marvel like the IMELSA. Where had it dug that up from? Hammond could guess what it was

doing. It was finding what was needed. That's what IMELSAs did. How had it put it in the interrogation? "Maximising the quality of life score." Yes, that was it. The system was maximising Haze's happiness. To help him move on. That was all. It had Charlie Haze all worked out.

Hammond heard the sound of Haze snivelling in the corridor. He had a sudden aversion to the man. He was weak. That's how he'd ended up letting those three men die, that's what had led him to turn up at Hammond's offices that morning, whining about the IMELSA, and that's what had led him to break into Hammond's offices now.

What right did he have? What right had Haze to second guess an over-judge? What right did he have to be aboard The Dauntless in the first place, for that matter? Haze had been born here, he hadn't earned his passage like Hammond. Hammond had been as lenient on him as possible. He'd thought his mistake excusable. But this? No, the man had crossed a line now. Breaking into an over-judge's offices. That wasn't just a mistake. It was a crime, plain and simple. Hammond should push the panic button. Get Jed down here to lock the man in a cell. And then? Haze should do time for this. That was the law. That was the right judgment. Hammond was sure.

He heard footsteps from the corridor. Haze was coming back. In a few moments, he would reach the bend in the corridor, and Hammond would have to act. He looked at the panic button on the wall. Where would Jed be now? Probably just finishing up his checks at the sentencing cells and heading down the staircase, wondering why Hammond had taken it upon himself to get involved.

The squeak of Haze's shoes had nearly reached the corner of the corridor. Hammond squared his shoulders.

"Wait." It was the IMELSA's voice. "Take this."

Haze's footsteps retreated back towards the IMELSA's cell.

"What is it?"

“I used to make these for one of my patients,” said the IMELSA. “It made her happier. I’d like you to have it.”

There was a pause. “To remember?” said Haze.

“If you like,” said the IMELSA. “When I used to make them for her I would sometimes find myself smiling, even though no one could see. I never understood that.”

“Thank you,” said Haze, and then his footsteps came back down the corridor.

Quietly, Hammond slipped back into the stairwell and closed the door.

*

The journey back through the pipe was quicker than the journey down. Charlie pushed back a fresh wave of claustrophobia as he squeezed his body into the jagged opening he’d cut on the way in. But once inside he was helped along by the downward slope, and when he got back to the main pipe it felt almost roomy in comparison.

He’d left the IMELSA in the cell while its face morphed back into that of the old man. Charlie had looked back and waved. The IMELSA had only smiled and walked back to the recharging plate. As he crawled along the pipes, Charlie had an inexplicable sense of relief.

In a way, he’d achieved nothing. The IMELSA was still going to be terminated, he was still going back to his low grade pipe-worker job, and the likes of Spike Morgan would always hate him for what he’d done. But something had shifted. He felt that he could face the world again, although he couldn’t explain why.

It wasn’t until he was almost back at the hatch that he thought to check how long it had been since he’d first entered the pipes. He looked at his watch.

“An hour!” he said aloud.

Even with the delays that he was counting on when he first entered the pipe system, a team should have made it to the seal he’d closed by now. If he’d been the supervisor in that

situation he would have assumed that the seal mechanism had failed somehow, and just reopened it. He should be dead by now. Even if they'd decided to do an air pressure test first he ought to have felt it. In fact, an air pressure test would have burst his eardrums. Why had nothing happened?

Charlie scrambled the last few feet of the pipe to the hatch and tried to push it open. It was sealed. He was sure that he'd only let it fall shut on the way in, he hadn't sealed it, but now it was screwed tight shut. Charlie rolled onto his back and grabbed the handles of the interior locking ring and tried to twist it. He couldn't move it. Someone had tightened the hatch from the outside.

What could he do now? He could crawl back the way he'd come, but then he'd be trapped in Judge Hammond's building. Or he could go further and try to find another minor pipe to cut his way out of. But how long would that take him? Surely, they would flood the pipe soon. And even if he found another tributary pipe how would he know where to cut? He'd only memorized the route to Judge Hammond's building.

Charlie pushed his back against the metal wall of the pipe and tried again to turn the handle of the locking ring, fearing at any moment that he would hear the sound of the cold water rushing up behind him. The locking ring wouldn't budge. He screamed in frustration and thumped the surface of the hatch. Then he heard a sound that made his blood run cold. A deafening scrape of metal on metal resounded from the walls of the pipe. They were reopening the seal.

Charlie closed his eyes and he saw it all for the last time. Jake Peters, screaming orders over the sound of the water gushing in, Bob Hutton's fists banging against the inside of the pipe, and Gilbert Maddox's face, pale and disbelieving, still holding his sealing iron, staring at the wall of water racing towards him. Maddox turned to face Charlie and fixed him with those over-wide, hazel eyes. "Enough," he said, as the water engulfed him.

Charlie braced himself. He waited for the inevitable rush of cold water to hit his body, but it never came. The metal scraping sound grew faster and louder until there was a creak and a loud clunk. Charlie opened his eyes. A circle of light had opened above him and he squinted stupidly into it.

"Idiot!" said a voice. "You stupid idiot! What are you trying to do? Kill yourself in one of my pipes? Do you think that's going to make it all better?"

Charlie felt a strong pair of hands grab him by the collar and lift him out of the pipe into a sitting position.

"Get out of my pipe, nutjob!"

Only when his head reached the hatch did he realise what was happening. He pushed his feet against the floor and ended up sitting on the rim of the hatch, his legs still inside the pipe.

"Sasha, is that you?"

"Who do you think it is, shit for brains?" Sasha was grabbing him by the front of his overalls as though they were lapels and shaking him.

"Your pipes? Are you the new supervisor then?"

"Yes, I'm the new supervisor. What the hell are you doing crawling around my pipe system without telling anyone. You could have been killed!"

"I went to see the IMELSA."

Sasha pushed him. Charlie's body rocked but he managed not to fall backwards.

"The IMELSA?" she said. "What?"

"They're going to kill it, Sasha."

"I know," said Sasha, "I saw that, but.... holy shit, Charlie. The pipes?" She grabbed him by the front of his boiler suit again. "We're just next to Hammond's offices. Did you break into the cells?"

Charlie nodded.

"You crazy bastard, Haze. It's just a machine. It doesn't matter."

"I had to try, Sasha. She got it right."

"What? She got what right?"

"She killed Maddox."

"Yeah, it killed Maddox," repeated Sasha, "that's why they're destroying it. So what?"

"She killed Maddox," repeated Charlie looking up at Sasha, "like I should have killed you."

She let go of him, more gently this time. She rolled back on her haunches and sat down on the pipe opposite him.

"You should have killed me," said Sasha.

Charlie couldn't tell if it was a question or a statement. He'd always assumed that she thought he'd made the wrong call that day, but now he wasn't so sure. To say to her face that he wished he'd killed her seemed like a new violation. But he'd lived with so much regret about that one decision for so long he couldn't back down now.

"Yeah," he said. "I should have flicked the switch. I should have saved Jake and Bob and Gilbert. But I couldn't do it. Because that would mean..."

"It would mean drowning me," said Sasha.

Charlie blinked. His eyes felt hot. He looked down into the hatch. Sasha let her legs drop into the hole opposite Charlie's.

"I did tell you to," she said. The words cut him, but her voice was gentle now.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just couldn't do it. I couldn't do something like that. I wasn't strong enough."

"Hey," said Sasha, putting her hand on Charlie's shoulder. "Hey, Charlie. I get it."

Charlie looked up.

"I get it," she said. "No one should have to make that kind of decision. No one should have to decide who to kill. Sure, I'm angry at you. I feel like I'm carrying those boys' lives around my neck. Like I'm the reason that they're dead. But I guess it's been worse for you."

Charlie wiped his arm across his face, forgetting that his sleeve was still covered in pipe scum. He felt the black wetness of it smear across his eyes.

Sasha snorted through her nose. "Haze," she said, shaking her head and handing him a rag from her boiler-suit pocket, "you're such a tool."

Charlie laughed back a little. Sasha had always been like this, all fire and kindness at the same time.

"So how come it's not with you?"

"Sorry?" said Charlie, pushing the rag into the corner of his eyes with his index finger.

"The IMELSA thing. I thought you were on a rescue mission?"

"It wouldn't come," said Charlie. "Said it was better if it was killed. Terminated. Whatever."

Sasha whistled. "So, wasted journey eh?"

"No," said Charlie, "No, not really."

"You're nuts, Haze," said Sasha, shaking her head, but she was smiling at him and that felt good.

"So how come you're down here, if you're the new supervisor?" said Charlie. "Aren't you meant to be up in the control room?"

"I can do what I damn well like now, I'm the boss."

Charlie smiled as he heard his own words quoted back at him.

"Wish I'd stuck to that," he said.

"Yeah well, move on Haze. We all have to."

Charlie nodded. "But how did you know to come down here? You should have just run a remote check and reflooded the pipes."

“Knew it was you didn’t I? Had to be. I knew you must be doing something crazy so I told them to keep running things up in the control room, while I investigated. Said I wanted to keep my hand in. They seemed to buy it. Apart from Ling. He knew something was up, but he won’t say anything.”

“But how did you know it was me?”

“Look at your ID card, dumb-ass.”

Charlie unzipped the waterproof card holder from the breast pocket of his boiler-suit and took out his passcard. He turned it over and noticed the little squiggle that had been painted on it in purple nail varnish.

“You’ve been using it since I lent it to you that day.”

“Oh,” said Charlie. He stroked his finger over the little purple squiggle and felt the raised profile against his fingerprint. “But why didn’t you report it?”

“Didn’t have the heart,” said Sasha. “Besides I could track your access history on the system while you were using my card. It’s been nice to see what you’ve been up to, sewerage boy!”

Charlie laughed.

“Course I’ll have to report it as stolen now that you’ve turned to a life of crime. You’d better destroy it. Tonight.”

“Sure,” said Charlie, scrambling to his feet. “I guess I should go.”

“I guess you had.”

Charlie jumped down from the pipes and made his way to the ladder that led from the inter-deck to ring seven.

“Charlie?”

He turned around. Sasha was still sitting with her legs dangling into the access hatch.

“Thank you,” she said. “I mean I still think you fucked up, but... thank you.”

Charlie nodded.

“And it might be nice if you dropped by the control room some time.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, Ling misses you,” she said smiling.

“I’ll do that,” said Charlie. “Oh, and by the way, you might want to send a team down to Judge Hammond’s basement before you open that section of pipe. There’s a man-sized hole in the inflow pipe there.”

Sasha rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Haze. You just live to make work for me don’t you.”

Charlie smiled as he stomped back down the back-alleys away from the interdeck. When he got to the street, he took Sasha’s passcard from his breast pocket, snapped it and threw it into a street bin. He’d a long walk home, but he took his time. He had lots to think about. He reached into the opposite breast pocket and pulled out what the IMELSA had given him. It was a perfect, origami fox, sitting upright with its tail curled around its front paws. Charlie stroked the folds of its paper ears with the tip of his finger, then carefully put it back into his pocket and headed home.

*

Hammond knew it was Maria by the rapid-fire triple-knocks he heard on his front door. He’d heard that knock many times before on his office window, but it sounded out of place resounding from the polished, wooden floors of his home on ring seven. Could it really be Maria? Hammond had lived in this house for nearly a decade. A large, Georgian style townhouse, close to Trolleycar and walking distance to his offices. Most people on the Dauntless would kill to live in a house like his. And yet he couldn’t remember Maria ever having visited him there before. That wasn’t surprising, Maria was never one to appreciate luxury. So, why would she visit him now? Why not just come to his office? Hammond opened the front door and looked down to see his friend standing on stone steps in front of the house.

"Hello, Maria!" he said.

"Hammond," said Maria with a quick nod, pushing past him into the hall.

"Everything ok?" It was dark outside. The screens on the interdeck ceiling displayed a clear, star-filled night. Hammond closed the door behind him and turned to face Maria.

"Well?" said Maria.

"Sorry?"

"Well, are you going to offer me a drink or are we just going to stand in your hall?" she said.

"Sorry," said Hammond, "what would you like?"

"Scotch," barked Maria. "In here is it?" She marched down the hall and pushed open the door to Hammond's study.

Hammond frowned. Maria was always brusque. It was one of the things he liked about her. But there was another edge to her manner today. Something was wrong. By the time Hammond walked back into his study carrying two glasses, Maria was sitting in his easy chair with her legs crossed.

"Mind if I smoke," she asked, the flame of her lighter already touching the tendrils of tobacco protruding from her pipe.

"Not at all," said Hammond, handing her the glass.

She gave it a sniff. "Laphroaig?"

Hammond nodded.

"God! Must be the last bottle on the ship."

"Not quite," said Hammond, "but I keep it for special occasions."

Hammond expected some derogatory comment about his expensive tastes, but Maria's features softened. "That's kind of you, Hammond," she said, "Thank you."

Hammond nodded. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Maria sniffed and took a pull on her pipe. "Interrupt you working, did I?"

Hammond frowned. It was unlike Maria to avoid the subject. He was beginning to find her awkwardness unsettling. "Yeah," he said looking at the papers on his desk, " just trying to get to the bottom of this Petersen case."

"Ah the woman who's looking for her son?" said Maria.

Hammond nodded. "Want to hear the details?"

Maria shook her head. "Not at all, Hammond. I'm sure you have it in hand?"

Hammond took a sip of his whiskey. Maria uncrossed and recrossed her legs. Then she stood up. On the mantelpiece above the fire was a small origami fox, folded out of some of Hammond's scrap paper. The lines of the printed words from a recent case made diagonal lines across the little creature's back.

Maria picked it up. Hammond took a step towards her and then stopped.

"Feeling creative were we?" said Maria.

Hammond went back to his desk chair and sat down. "It relaxes me, helps me concentrate."

Maria stared at him, nodding slowly.

"So is it a case of yours?"

"Hmm?" asked Maria looking up at him.

"Did you want to discuss a case?" asked Hammond.

Maria shook her head. It was an aggressive motion as though she were trying to shake off a fly. She put the origami fox back down on the mantelpiece and stared into the flames displayed on the screen in Hammond's hearth. Hammond was worried now. He'd never seen Maria like this before. She took a long, slow mouthful of whiskey and then sat back down.

"I'm dying, Hammond."

Maria carried on gazing at the flames. The silence lingered between them. Hammond knew he should say something but he couldn't seem to move. His mind was empty. He kept on replaying the words as if they had to have some different meaning.

"Cancer, Too much of this bloody thing," she said, waving her pipe in the air.

Once Maria made eye contact Hammond began to find words to say. "Cancer? Are you sure?"

"Course I'm sure, you moron." The quietness of her voice belied the harsh words.

"Doctor gave me the results yesterday. Lungs are riddled with it."

"But dying? Can't they do something? What about a lung donor?"

"Already metastasized. Anyway, I'm too old for a donor."

"But, you're an over-judge. Can't you...?"

"It's not my style to cheat the system, Hammond. You know that. Besides." She swirled the whiskey in her glass and stared into it.

"Besides, what?"

Maria sighed. "I'm tired, Hammond. I'm tired of it all. We'll get to Gowah in six years, and what then? I haven't the energy to start a new life. It's time to go I think."

"Oh Maria," said Hammond. He stood up from his seat and walked across the room towards her.

Maria looked up at him in alarm. "Hammond, if you try to hug me I swear I'll break your nose!"

Hammond came to a stop halfway across his office. He put his hands in his pockets and stood there unsure what to do with himself. Maria tilted her head backwards and laughed.

"I'm sorry Hammond," she said, shaking her head. "I shouldn't laugh."

Hammond smiled. He leant against his desk and reached backwards for his whiskey glass.

Maria stood up and walked over to him. "You know you're the only person I've told?"

Hammond shook his head.

“I don’t want a fuss. I can’t...” She lifted her hand and held it for a moment in the air indecisively. Then she tapped him three times on the shoulder, as though she were knocking on his front door again. “I don’t want other people’s emotions,” she said.

Hammond nodded.

“Anyway,” she said, “let’s talk about something else. Want to run this Petersen case by me?”

Hammond shook his head. “Not really,” he said. “She boarded us illegally by teleportation so she could find her son. He’s on board with a trafficking gang. She’s broken the law but it was an extreme circumstance. I’m minded to be lenient. I think most people would understand why she did it, and we can’t send her back to Earth. Now that she’s reunited with her son, I don’t think it damages anyone’s quality of life to let her stay.”

“Quality of life?” said Maria. “That sounds like something that IMELSA would have said?”

Hammond walked back to his chair and sat down. “Well, it’s a useful way of thinking about things.”

“Really got under your skin that one, didn’t it?” said Maria.

Hammond didn’t reply.

“Strange the ones that bother us, and the ones that don’t. Did you go down when they terminated it?”

Hammond nodded.

“I imagine it was straightforward. No family to get upset. No need for a doctor to attend. I guess they just shut it down somehow?”

“I did it myself actually.”

“You did it yourself? You carried out the termination?”

Hammond nodded “Yeah, the security guys thought it was a bit weird, but they do what I tell them, don’t they? I needed closure, I think.”

“Was it hard?”

Hammond shook his head “As you say. It’s just like shutting down a computer. The guys from Deep Medical offered to do it, but it was very simple. I just got them to send me some instructions. And she didn’t resist. Just stood on the charging plate while I followed the instructions. Remarkable really.”

“She?”

“Well, you know. She..., it..., whatever.”

“And where did they put its body?”

“Deep Medical wouldn’t reuse any parts. There’s a kind of superstition about it now. People act as though it was evil, as though it could somehow corrupt another system. It’s nonsense of course. They never found anything wrong with that IMELSA, but everyone thinks there was a fault of some sort. They melted it down.”

“They melted it down?”

Hammond nodded.

“So there’s no trace?”

Maria walked back to the fire and picked up the little origami fox from the mantelpiece. She flipped it over and followed one of the folds along its tiny body with the tip of her finger.

“Well done, Hammond,” she said, “that was a brave thing to do.”

“Brave?” said Hammond.

Maria smiled and nodded. Then she picked her coat up from the back of her chair. “Yes,” she said. “I mean it would have been easier not to get involved wouldn’t it? It was brave to go down and see it done yourself.”

Hammond rose to his feet.

“Don’t worry, Hammond,” said Maria. “I think you did the right thing. You’re a good man.”

Hammond narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

Maria began walking towards the door.

“Wait,” said Hammond. “Do you want... I don’t know. Do you want to meet up more often now until...”

Maria turned around, her eyebrows raised. “I said I didn’t want a fuss, Hammond. I just wanted you to hear it from me. Besides, I’m overwhelmed at the office.”

“The office? But...” Hammond paused. “Aren’t you going to slow down a bit?”

Maria shook her head. “No, I’m not one for lying down if I can help it. And Hammond,” she said, jabbing his chest with her finger. “If you tell anyone else about this before I do I’ll have your balls under a gavel do you understand?”

Hammond smiled. “Sure, Maria,” he said. “Maybe we can meet up a bit more often though?”

“Yeah, maybe,” she said.

He walked her to the front door and opened it. The street was still empty outside.

“Well, see you then,” she said and she marched through Hammond’s back gate, her head upright, her stride as long as her tiny legs could make it.

“Goodbye!” shouted Hammond after her.

Maria threw a hand up in the air in farewell, almost as if she were swatting away a fly. She didn’t turn around.

Hammond smiled. He had the feeling that he would never see her again, and he had an urge to run down the street and to tell her how much she meant to him. But he stayed where he was, leaning against his door frame, watching the tiny woman hurry down the street. He thought about that last comment and wondered how much she knew. Doesn’t matter, he thought. Maria would tell no one.

“Go well, Maria Henshaw,” he said quietly, “you did enough.”

He watched her disappear around the corner of the street then he turned back into the house. Back in his office, he picked up the origami fox from the mantelpiece above the fireplace.

He shook his head. It had been stupid of him to leave it there, but he hadn't expected visitors, least of all Maria Henshaw.

He heard footsteps behind him, the door creaked slightly. "Do you think she knows?"

"Yeah, she knows," replied Hammond. "Maria's as sharp as a razor blade." He turned around, still holding the little fox, and winced slightly when he looked up. "Jesus! Jump in her grave as fast would you?"

Maria Henshaw's face looked profoundly misplaced on the neck of the slim, tall body in front of him. The face frowned. "I'm sorry, I thought it would be helpful. I can change."

Hammond paused for a moment. He turned and put the little paper fox back on the mantelpiece. "No, don't worry about it," he said. "Leave it. Now tell me what you think about this Mallory case," he said, pulling out a folder from his desk. "Did you look at it yet?"

THE END