

Holding fast to a clipboard in one hand and a standard pen in the other, the man stood in front of a bright computer screen beside of a large piece of laboratory equipment. As the unit before him conducted its tests on the sample he had just inserted, apathy filled gaze scanned the monitor as results began to appear. Dark circles lined the skin beneath his eyes and he had failed to suppress a tired yawn. Exhaustion was quickly taking over as the numbers on the screen seemed to blur together.

Attempting to shake himself awake and focus on his work, the man felt something slip down his left arm. Looking down toward his hand, the man grunted frustratedly as he slipped the small pet collar he had wrapped around his wrist under his lab coat sleeve again. Allowing himself a deep breath and a sheepish stretch of his arms and back, the scientist had returned to his work with hyper-fixation. He could still smell the pleasant aroma of the coffee he had already drained from his mug and although he briefly considered pausing to go and retrieve another cup, the man resolved to keep working through the fatigue.

Even when the doors to the man's laboratory slid open on the opposite side of the room, he had not glanced back to see who had entered. The clap of shoes upon the tiled flooring signaled that his visitor was approaching his desk before the rhythmic thumps finally ceased entirely. Listening to the shuffle of some of the papers and books stacked on his desk behind him and the quiet huff as the guest jumped up onto the space they had cleared for themselves, the man knew precisely who had stopped in to see him. Although he had thought that he had prepared himself for this, the mere thought of turning to face who waited for him strangled his already tight throat. Beyond the machine that the man operated loudly whirring as its mechanical arm moved from sample to test station and more, an uncomfortable silence had befallen the room that the two inhabited.

"Hey-yo! Saw you were online so I wanted to come by and say 'hi'! How long you been here? You don't usually come in this early," the familiar voice called out from across the room after a brief moment of waiting for the man to finish his work. Simply hearing his colleague's amicable and happy-go-lucky tone seemed to stab at his being with a metaphorical, cold scalpel. For the briefest moment, he felt his lip quiver and rapidly blinked away the blur in his vision without turning back to his guest.

Sitting atop the desk near the front of the laboratory was a woman in a lab coat and jeans. Dark and wavy hair had been tied back into a ponytail and some, as she often referred to them, ugly work shoes covered her feet. Juliana had just returned to work after a week away for her sister's wedding and was as chipper as she always was. It was precisely that upbeat attitude that the man was afraid of disappointing with the upsetting news about what had transpired while his colleague was away.

Instead of returning any sort of pleasantries with Juliana, the scientist made as though he were wholly invested in his work. His sheer determination to make like nothing was out of the ordinary made shrugging off the sluggishness he had been experiencing since he had gotten into work a simple task. Although he felt a twinge of guilt over ignoring the woman at the front of the room, the man already knew that Juliana would not just let things be. Without even needing to turn, he felt the woman's annoyed and piercing gaze boring into the back of his head which flushed his whole being with mild anxiety and embarrassment.

"Uh, hello? Earth to James?" the woman called out again, her voice quickly filling with her irritation over her colleague's apparent brushing off her greeting. Again, the man refused to respond, or rather his flustered nerves prohibited any sort of response. He felt his heart skip a beat as Juliana's shoes clapped down upon the floor as she pushed off of his desk. James felt his teeth biting down uncomfortably on his lower lip as his colleague continued to press for some conversation, "Oh, I leave you alone for a week and suddenly you're not talking to me?"

Frozen in place with tensed limbs still as stone, James desperately wished he could just disappear from sight. With a surprising amount of difficulty, the man managed to swallow the anxious knot in the back of his throat that had been choking him all morning. Even still, he failed to open his mouth for anything other than some quiet, nervous panting. He found himself holding onto one short breath as the clap of shoes upon his lab's tiled flooring drew near before it suddenly stopped halfway between him and his desk.

"Hey, where's the little guy? Oh wow, did you actually get approval to take it home? That's honestly a bit upsetting; I actually brought this little cat sweater that I thought would

look cute on it, too! Aw, well, didn't seem like it would have much to do with anyone but you anyways," Juliana asked curiously, having noted the absence of the large, plastic pet carrier that James usually kept in his laboratory. Finally resigning himself to his long-time friend's disappointment in him, James turned to find Juliana staring surprised at the empty space where the carrier once resided. In her hands was a small red pet sweater with black trims. Heaving a sigh, the woman folded the small article of clothing and tossed it squarely upon James' desk before starting to speak again, "You'll send me a picture when you finally ge—"

"They took O-13E," James interrupted suddenly, his voice both blunt and forward. Although he had managed to muster up all of his willpower to present himself as calm and collected, his admission of what had happened felt like a powerful blow to his back that knocked the air from his lungs. Having revealed what had become of the small creature he was meant to be handling, Juliana fell silent for a moment in stunned shock. Backing off slightly, the woman bit her lip as she tried to carefully consider her words.

"O-oh... Well... when will you get to see—," the woman started to ask.

"I won't," James, again, interrupted with just as much of an apathetic and disinterested voice as the first time. Although the man wanted that to be the end of the conversation, he knew just unlike Juliana it would be to simply drop things like that. If anything, he was surprised with himself and how he had not anticipated the woman growing so frustrated, almost hostile even, with his dismissal of the subject.

"Tch! Just like that? You must be pranking me, man. You've been working with Obi for, what, six months now? That little thing loved you and they just took it from you?" Juliana scolded, her voice dripping with vehement irritation. Although he knew he was going to regret his next move, James had resolved to push through the remorse and upset as he set aside his notepad and pen.

"Yep," the man replied simply as he began to walk toward the front of the room. He was immediately halted in his tracks, however, as Juliana pushed a hand to his chest and prevented his passage. Looking down to the slightly shorter woman, James could see the disgust and disbelief in her expression.

“‘Yep’?” Juliana repeated in a somewhat mocking fashion. Her frustration with James and his apparent disregard for the creature he had been taking care of for so long was not unusual. Even when the two were attending university together she would often employ some ‘tough-love’ strategies when James despaired over things such as upcoming exams. Combined with her usual peppy and fun-loving cheer, the woman’s eccentric personality was something James had come to admire in her. Though, today was not a good day for the man as he simply tried to move around Juliana. Still holding him back, not forcefully but enough to keep James from getting around her, the woman pressed, “That all you have to say about the situation?”

“Yep,” the man replied simply as he gently grasped Juliana’s hand and removed it from his person. The agitation in Juliana’s face had shifted as James then moved around her and made for the door. He had not even stopped as he passed his desk but leaned to the side to snatch up his coffee mug. Utterly bewildered and appalled by her friend’s depressing behavior, the woman watched as the automatic doors slid open and the scientist departed from his laboratory.

For a brief moment, Juliana required a moment to recompose herself as she stood confused in James’ laboratory. Huffing her agitation with her colleague, the woman began to walk for the door in pursuit of James. Entering into the hallway, the woman looked both ways, barely catching her target turning a corner as he made for the break room. Marching after him, several other coworkers had attempted to call out morning greetings only to receive the cold shoulder; Juliana was too focused on trying to figure out what James’ problem was this morning.

Storming down the corridor after her friend, Juliana rounded the same corner behind which James had disappeared. She then continued further down the next hallway until it opened up into a comfortable break area. Two nice coffee makers sat upon a small counterspace with a deep sink basin in between. Several padded seats and couches had been placed around one long, rectangular table, only two employees sat quiet and on their phones on the not-especially-but-good-enough comfortable furnishings. Large windows opened up to the parking garage next door so the view was not exactly interesting. James had already

set his mug under the nozzle to one of the coffee makers and waiting for his next dose of caffeine.

“Wow, when did you become such a pitiful wimp? Well, I mean, more of one than usual?” Juliana demanded more so than asked. Although she felt some fury toward her friend for his dismissive attitude, she still managed to hold herself back and even tried to show some friendly banter with her snarky quip. James merely gave her a tired side-eye glance before heaving a tired sigh as the machine poured fresh, hot coffee into the mug. After the beverage was prepared, the man collected his mug and turned toward his friend.

“Jules, I’m not in the mood,” James replied flatly as he sipped at the brew in his mug. The two coworkers that were seated nearby gave one another a confused glance before returning to their phones. It was obvious that they were listening in, either for some interesting gossip or in case they need to report an incident to HR was unclear.

“Oh, yeah? Well get over it; I know you and you’re in one of your little negative-nancy fits,” Juliana snapped back as she crossed her arms over her chest. James’ listless gaze fell toward the floor between them; not even the heavenly aroma wafting into his nose from his mug was able to settle his nerves. Allowing a brief moment for the man to regain composure, Juliana’s stance softened somewhat as she allowed her arms to fall back to her sides, “Talk to me, James.”

“What’s there to talk about? My role in Project O-13E is at its end. They don’t need me and I have other work to do. Might be working with your group real soon, trying to investigate some of the potential product yield limitations you’ve been seeing or something like that,” James stated with a shake of his head. Taking another sip of the hot, dark drink, the sting of guilt struck his core once more as Juliana let loose an excited snort of amusement. However, having known the woman as long as he had, that display of interest was not her genuine excitement.

“Well, welcome to the team!” exclaimed Juliana with a wide, exaggerated smile upon her face. Both hands had been thrown up as if she were about to wrap James in a bear hug in mock celebration before dropping back to her sides. Obviously annoyed with her friend, the woman allowed her true feelings to resurface, “Seriously? We’ve already

narrowed that down to something more in the engineering group's realm. You don't even give a damn about that stuff!"

"It's not what I 'even give a damn' about. I'm here to work my job, Jules, not play pet owner to O-13E," James replied, starting to feel somewhat annoyed with his friend's persistence on the matter himself.

"Obi," Juliana retorted. The mere mention of O-13E's nickname had prompted James to cough up the swallow of coffee he was in the middle of. His sudden fit of hacking and choking had taken the woman off guard somewhat as she waited for James to catch his breath.

Once he had managed to recollect himself and breath air instead of hot coffee, James shifted his mug over to his left hand. His right hand then rubbed over the coat sleeve that covered that small band wrapped around his left wrist. Feeling himself starting to choke up a bit just holding onto the trinket, he mentally resolved he would need to dispose of it later. The mere thought, however, sent shivers down his spine and both legs felt weak beneath him. With an uneasy breath, the man sipped his coffee and began to march back for his lab while hoping that Juliana would simply leave him be. He knew better than to desire something like that, however, as the woman walked right at his side as the two departed the break area.

"So that's really it then? You're just giving up like that? That ain't like you," Juliana semi-scolded, her tone clearly rich with aggravation over the ordeal.

"It's not that I'm giving up, I'm just being realistic: there isn't anything I can do at this point. Plain and simple, that's final," returned James as the two continued to walk back in the direction of his laboratory. Juliana seemed to grow quiet for a time, though James knew he was going to get an earful of outrage later. As the two reached his lab door again, the man turned to his friend and coldly barked, "I'd like to see what you'd do in my shoes."

His bold challenge had elicited a surprising display of shock and concern from Juliana. Whatever ferocity she had been sitting on had instantly dissipated as she must have been mentally contemplating what she might do had she been in a similar situation. Having to choose between the small animal-like being and one's own livelihood was not quite the clear-cut decision that the woman must have thought it was when looking at the situation

from the outside. Heaving a disappointed sigh, Juliana stood silent as James opened the door to his laboratory.

“They tell you what they’re doing with it now?” Juliana asked as she followed the scientist into the next room.

“Nope,” James replied without even turning to face his friend. He could not shake the feeling that perhaps he was being a bit too harsh when it was clear she was doing everything she thought she could to help. Logic plainly dictated that he move on at this point and Juliana’s insistence was not making that a simple matter.

“Well, ain’t you just a ray of sunshine today. Man, I’m tryin’ my best here and you are actively pushing back on everything I say!” retorted Juliana, half complaining and half furious with James. The arguing was starting to become a mental drain for the both of them; combined with the overwhelming fatigue weighing heavily upon James’ body, the man found himself unable to hold himself back any longer.

“What do you expect me to do?! I do miss it! But just because I miss Obi doesn’t mean I can just put in a request to get it back!” snapped James, spinning around to face Juliana and spilling a few droplets of his beverage from his mug. Once again, he found his right hand firmly wrapped around the section of sleeve that covered the band loosely fit around his left wrist. Frustrated with not just the job and Juliana’s pestering, the immense anger and irritation he felt with himself had become too much as he desperately fought to maintain some semblance of control.

“So, you’re just gonna run yourself into the ground doing work from the moment you open your eyes in the morning to the moment you crash from exhaustion?” Juliana returned, crossing her arms over her chest again. Despite James’ outburst, the woman seemed entirely unfazed. She had never been one to back down in the face of adversity and the man’s childish whining was not about to slow her down.

An awkward silence had fallen over the room as the unit James had been operating in the back of the lab had finally concluded its test and returned to sleep mode. Allowing himself a deep breath, the man felt his shoulders slump downward in defeat. He had hoped that engrossing himself in his other work would perhaps take his mind off of what no longer

remained waiting for him in his lab every morning. Heaving a weary and upset sigh, the scientist watched in glum silence as Juliana reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Look, there ain’t an easy answer for something like this... I get that the boss-man said, ‘no and that’s final’, but you’re givin’ up hope way too early,” Juliana said, her voice now carrying a soft tenderness to it. James could not shake the dread that gripped his heart but at least managed to control himself this time. He began to reach upwards to gently grasp his friend’s hand that rested on his shoulder.

“Jules...” James had started to reply. He found himself silenced by a hand placed over his mouth, his friend’s ‘polite’ way of telling him to shut up and let her speak. Juliana’s stern gaze softened as she locked eyes with the scientist. The burning frustration she had exhibited previously seemed to have morphed into collected patience and understanding, another bizarre quirk that James truly appreciated in the woman.

“How about this: you still got some time off, yeah? I only have, like, two maybe three days left in the year. Why don’t we take a Thursday off, grab a bite and see a movie or something just to clear our heads like we did back in school together,” Juliana suggested softly before removing her hand from James’ mouth. With a deep breath, James returned his coffee mug to its place upon his desk before sitting down in his chair. Believing her friend to have settled down after their bickering, Juliana returned to her own place upon the desk and turned to continue her proposal, “We can take the following Friday off to plan something out to maybe get you Obi back, okay? Just try? If not for yourself, then for the little guy?”

“I don’t know what good any of it might do but... I guess it’s worth talking things out at least. So long as we don’t wind up arguing again; the day just started and I’ve already got a headache,” James replied as he settled back into his desk chair with a long-winded exhale. While the small band wrapped around his wrist reminded him that its intended wearer was still out of reach, having Juliana come by to talk with him had been somewhat rejuvenating. Even still, though, the man could feel a slight pounding in his skull where blood vessels pumped vigorously after his infuriating argument with his colleague.

Running his fingers in circular motions around his temples, the man leaned over in his seat. Reaching for one of the drawers fixed into his desk, he pulled the storage space

open to reveal mostly common office supplies such as pens, notepads, paperclips, and more. However, in a small plastic bag, were small pink pills that he had brought from home. Opening the bag and dropping one of the tablets into his palm, James was shocked as a dark-skinned hand snatched away the aspirin he had retrieved.

“You are lot to deal with sometimes,” Juliana said with a mischievous smirk on her face before popping the pill into her mouth. James merely rolled his eyes, all too familiar with the woman’s playful antics and snarky banter.

“Oh, ha, ha,” James retorted as his voice oozed sarcasm. Despite the annoyed inflection in his tone, a friendly smile of its own had worked its way across his lips.

Darkness had swallowed the laboratory in its cold, lonesome void making it dreadfully difficult for one to relax. Several different machines, though without their operators present, had been left running samples as the staff departed for the evening. Even the gentle hum of the air conditioning unit would make for a comfortable ambiance compared to the overwhelming cacophony of the multiple mechanical arms running forward and back, gears and servos whirring loudly, and ventilation fans or exhausts working at their limits to maintain the machine they were fixed into. Often times, leaving the equipment running was just a much more efficient means to getting work done given overtime was not always available.

While all of the employees had long since vacated the premises, one set of ears still remained within the lab space to be subjected to the uproarious machines still operating outside normal hours. Only a few small LCD screens or operations LED lights provided any sort of illumination in the vast empty blackness that had taken over the world. Even so, these few sources of light did little to bring solace to the room’s sole inhabitant. Sight was not an issue with the small light blue orbs that had managed to make out the shapes of the lab instruments and desks and chairs and other furnishings. Light was not at all a necessity to feel the aftermath of the day’s examinations on the small body anyways; the darkness was simply an oppressive and frightening concept to the laboratory’s only test subject.

Curled up and pressed into the back corner of the steel cage it had been thrown into, a small, vulpine-like life form stared out the few, narrow spaces cut into the walls of its prison. Its little, blue eyes fixated in an almost hypnotized trance-like state upon that dreaded shelf once again. Every slight inhale stung olfactory glands with the overwhelming scent of formaldehyde and, now that it had returned, antiseptics as well. Joined by the boisterous songs of those dreaded laboratory instruments outside the steel walls, the small creature could picture those monsters creeping out from the shadows coming for it.

Having not just memorized the ghastly and monstrous contents of those glass sarcophagi lining that horrifying shelf, but vividly recalled the torment of previous trials as well had triggered the small fox-like being's heart to race faster and faster. Combined with the darkness and the raucous machines, it had already begun to visualize future testing conducted by those humans. It was an inconceivable thing for the young mind to fathom what the purpose of these tests were, the test subject simply knew it would be unpleasant as sharp tools and whirring gizmos cut into the flesh beneath the lines inked into its light purple fur. Scanning the shelves again and again and reliving those memories left the animal mortified as its imagination ran wild; did they simply want to toy with it until it was broken again?

Tears welled up in the wide, blue eyes that managed to partially pierce the overbearing darkness before rolling down into the short, silky fur. Stifling a sob, the machines slowly began to finally wind down as their tasks and tests completed. Silence, save for the air conditioning, would only provide a new and just as terrifying symphony: the muteness of loneliness. However, silence did not come even as the final instrument beeped its shut down. Ears had perked at the sound of muffled footsteps coming from the direction of the massive laboratory door.

Climbing to its small paws, the sort-of fox hesitantly crept closer to the door of its cage as cold tears still slid down its soaked furred face. Joining in the quiet tread of feet, at least two pairs of legs approaching, was the near silent voices of a man and woman. Partly intrigued and partly horrified by this unusual occurrence, the creature could feel the tension in its twin bovine-like tails easing out slightly as the two appendages tried to slip out from their tucked position between its legs. Already wide eyes grew ever larger as light flooded

the room with the whoosh of the automatic door sliding open in its tracks. Standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the light behind them, were the shapes of a human male and female. The sudden appearance of two humans, elicited a surprised gasp from the small animal in its cage.

“D-Dock-tur?”