“Mr. Jameson?” the large built secretary asked. “Ronald Jameson?”

A tired man of small stature looked up. “Uh, yes?”

He ran a nervous hand through what was left of his graying hair.

“Mr Wolzcamp is ready for you.” She said, gesturing to the large wooden door at the far end of the room.

“E-Excellent.” He sputtered, swiping up the papers of the report he had put together, glancing down at the stack one more time as he walked over to the doorway. In the stackwas his proposed plans for a new type of insurance package, one that he hoped Mr. Wolzcamp would take an interest in. He was very nervous.

He parted one section of the double door and entered the office.

Instantly, he felt more on edge. Everything was ornate, the woodwork was now in dark polished woods, the windows open up over the park itself, the walls were an opulent rich green. The room had a earthy scent to it, cloying the air. The late sun just barely managed to dodge through the buildings and into the room.

Mr. Wolzcamp himself sat at the head of a massive, imposing desk. The edifice took up most of one side of the room and was complemented by an equally massive chair, in whose green velvet embrace the regional manager sat.

“Come in. Have a seat.” The man said.

For some reason the utterances, completely benign out of this particular context, cracked out as implacable commands here in the man's office. Jameson acquiessed, barely aware of his limbs moving, as if they did so regardless of his own volition.

“Now, lets have a chat.” Mr. Wolzcamp said.

Jameson shot a quick look downward at the report he had assembled, but the other man's voice dragged his attention back to him.

“Before we go over whatever you have there, I thought now might be a good time to talk about your performance.”

The words struck Jameson like a knife sliding gently into his ribs.

“P-Performance?” He managed. “Is there something wrong?” He asked, timidly.

“Well...” Mr. Wolzcamp replied, shifting through some of his own papers. Jameson spied ledgers, reports, some he could have sworn even bore his name. “...Here's the thing.” He said, drawing out a lengthy itemized list of some sort.

“So, in order to operate such a division as the one I have the honor of heading, I ask a fair amount of my employees. In light of recent business acquisitions we have found ourselves a bit short of capital lately. Therefore, he have had to look a bit more closely at the performance of our employees.”

Jameson found himself running his hand through his hair again out of nervous habit. Suddenly he froze realizing that Mr. Wolzcamp was bald. His hand returned to clutching the report as fast as it could. Mr. Wolzcamp didn't seem to have noticed.

“How many new contracts have you been able to bring aboard this month?” Mr Wolzcamp asked blatantly.

On the spot, Jameson blurted out a number. He thought it sounded correct. In the moment his mind had been whiped, completely blank.

“Ah, um. I'm afraid the number I have here says a bit less than that. Not nessesarily a problem per se, but really we need all of our employees putting forth the most effort. Do you think that it would be possible to increase this number during the next quarter Mr. Jameson?”

Jameson found himself nodding violently. “Yes.. Of course.” With his horrible commute he would have to work later. And on weekends. But it was possible. “It goes with out saying.” He stuttered.

“I'm glad to hear that. I have to admit Mr. Jameson. We've had to scale back a bit in recent months, have to… trim the fat. You're a good employee. I would have hated if we had lost you.”

“Uh, thank you very much sir.” Jameson said. “I really appreciate it.”

“Well. Now that we have gotten that out of the way, what was it that you wanted to show me?” Suddenly Mr. Wolzcamp was all smiles. A absurd thought entered Jameson's brain: Mr. Wolzcamp's smile and his bald head lined up all too well, forming an egg shape.

Reality crashed back as he realized the manager was waiting for his response.

“Right. I have been overviewing our current offerings. I feel like there is a niche that neither us nor our competitors have addressed. I've put together a hypothetical package to address this short coming.” He said, handing the report to Wolzcamp, scarely realizing that he was displacing the other papers already on the man's desk.

“Ah, I see.” The regional manager said, producing a pair of reading glasses. He looked over the report in a cursory manner. Jameson sat with anticipation, but somehow knew the result even before the other man responded.

“This seems...reasonable. However, as I just mentioned, we are spread a bit thin at the moment. I'm afraid we currently don't have the resources to pursue this. We really need all of our employees working their hardest at their current assignments.” Wolzcamp admitted.

“Why don't you remind me of this in, lets say, six months? By then things will have normalized somewhat, assuming our investments paid off. How does that sound?”

“Perfect.” Jameson said. “Thank you for your time.” He said, rising to leave.

“Why don't you keep a hold of this?” Wolzcamp said, holding out Jameson's report. “I would hate to have it misplaced among all this.” He said, gesturing to the think blanket of papers on the desk.

“Of course sir.” Jameson said, receiving back the report. “Thank you for your time.” He said again, standing.

“Any time.” Wolzcamp said, with what Jameson interpreted as a dismissive tone.

Jameson walked quickly out of the room and breathed for the first time in many minutes, ignoring the stares of the secretary.

His hand went to his father's pocket watch and he spied the time. He still had three hours left of work until his train came.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he paused to adjust his somewhat worn suit in a passing mirror and began the long walk down the stairs, back to his office.

He occupied a small windowless unit near the center of the building, partially underneath one of the stairs. He had arranged it so that his desk was on the side of the office furthest away from the steps, but he still heard every step an employee made either up or down the building. Sometimes he could swear that he could identify who the people were by their footsteps against the wood.

He sighed. Meredith would be waiting with dinner. That was one bright side of things. She knew he was going to try to push the report today and had helped him practice what to say. It had been of little help; his mind just went blank when talking to the manager, regardless of how infrequently it happened.

It went little better than he had imagined. He knew that the manager wouldn't let him pursue his own project, regardless of the fact that Jameson was now actually the longest working employee at the division, after it changed ownership. He had been sad when, now almost five years ago, the old regional manager, Enton, had retired, claiming poor health.

Truth be told though, Wolzcamp had always lusted after the job. He had waited as long as he could and shoved Enton, aside when the wait was just to painful.

Jameson had thought about it for too long to be angry anymore. Now he was just sad. He wanted to go home. Away from the city and its wolves, back on that damnable train, back to his house and his wife. Just a couple more years and they would have saved enough. Just a few more years.

The minutes moved by glacially, but after what seemed like hundreds of memos and thousands of notes, and even a phone call, something which used to be somewhat exciting, the day was over. He could go home.

But not yet. He had to run the gauntlet. The northern local. The literal bane of his existence. Ever since Central had consolidated, the service on that corridor was spotty. Some days, the train was almost an hour late. The track was poorly maintained. He joked that he couldn't even sleep on the train it was so disruptive, but the sad thing was that it was true.

He hated the train and everything it stood for. An imposition on life. A literal constriction between the two worlds of his home and his work. And there was no other way. With the bills from Meredith's condition, they could never afford an automobile. And the house was his. He had grown up there, and owned it outright. Meredith loved it as well, her garden in the back, the patio, the brickwork, everything was home. Except for him. He needed to catch his damn train.

A brisk walk to the station ensued. Its hanger-like structure loomed over him, and the attempt at livening it up by adding windows only made it more sinister in the setting light, as shadows cast their shapes on the concrete floor.

“Excuse me. Has the 6:00 local left yet?” he inquired to a boothed official.

The official looked slowly down at a clipboard, fluttering a piece of paper around, probably for effect.

“Yes. In fact it just left.” The man said in a monotone.

“Are-Are you sure? Its barely 6:00 now!” Jameson said, pointing to his pocketwatch.

“I'm sorry sir. Perhaps your watch is slow.” The official said.

Impossible. He always made sure his watch was on time. He glanced up at the time piece at the top of the information booth. It read 6:00. But a glance beyond the official backed up the man's pronouncement. The 6:00 was gone. Track 3, its usual berth, was empty. As were all the other tracks. Except one.

“Hey, what train is that? On track 13? Could they have switched the track on you? Could that be the 6:00?”

“Hmm?” The official leaned out of the booth and followed Jameson's pointing finger to the large silver train resting on track 13.

“Oh. You know...I'm not sure what train that is. They're always trying to change the schedule on us. New tricks, new special routes. And they hardly tell us anything. Why don't you ask the conductor?”

Jameson nodded vigorously, but as he walked through the almost deserted station, he realized that the official was probably just trying to get rid of him.

Slightly miffed, he promised himself that the conductor would answer his problems. He spied the man around the front of the engine.

Although he was stressed from the way the day had went, and annoyed at the train service he had to stop for a moment to look at the engine.

It was massive. The black bulk seemed cast from a single piece. Windowless, its sides were tapered and the front slipped into a curve that ran down the front, with dual intake valves cleverly hidden on the side. The metal monolith exuded some sort of smoke from its top, although Jameson could see no defined smokestack.

“Ah. I see you are...admiring the Beast.” A tall and lanky man said, from somewhere to his side.

Jameson spun, surprised that he had been snuck up upon.

“Uh...Yes. I can't say I've ever seen anything like it before.” He admitted. The man wore a strange all black suit and shirt, with a black tie. It was cut unlike anything Jameson had ever seen, with a myriad of small buttons running up one side. The whole get up shimmered slightly in the golden sun. His hair was slicked back and when the man smiled at Jameson's response he revealed brilliant white teeth.

“And you probably won't ever again. Its a streamliner. One of its kind. Its steam, but I swear that I've been on it going a hundred or more.”

The Beast groaned heavily, smoke falling from its sides like the heavy breaths of some ancient dragon, steeped in legend. Jameson shook himself. The conductor.

“Excuse me. Are you the conductor for this train? The official at the desk didn't seem to know about this route.”

The man stared at Jameson. His eyes wide. An uncomfortable silence ensured. The conductors eyes were black he suddenly noticed. No distinction between pupil and iris, just pools of black. It was very disconcerting. But it was rude to stare.

“Yes...I am.” The conductor said slowly, as if watching or focusing on something just beyond either of their fields of vision.

Another silence.

“Well, uh, I want to know about this train.” Jameson said cautiously. He had embarked on the wrong one before, and the first stop southward wasn't for at least twenty minutes. All told the mistake usually cost him and hour or more if he was lucky, but once close to two hours.

“Where do you need to go?” The conductor said, suddenly very attentive. His eyes stared at Jameson.

“Does this train go as far as Mantuscet?” Jameson asked, quickly looking down at his watch. 6:07.

“Is that where you need to go?” The man asked in a very serious tone, checking his own stopwatch.

“Not exactly.” Jameson admitted. “Mantuscet is the nearest city. I get off at Willoughby.”

Willoughby wasn't known to be the most desirous place to live, but a man has to stand up for his town, he supposed.

“Willoughby.” The conductor repeated as if talking to someone else, rather than confirming.

“Err, yes. Is this train replacing the 6:00 local? Are you stopping at Willoughby?” Jameson asked, getting annoyed again. He just wanted to be home. Damn train.

“Replacing? No. The 6:00 already left. We're not replacing anything, don't you know? This is the 6:10 special. And it will definitely take you where you need to go.”

A whistle blew from somewhere within the innards of the Beast.

The conductor's eyes widened again. He clutched his watch and then looked back up at Jameson.

“Oh my. Its time, don't you know? Better climb aboard right now. 6:10. And we never leave late.” The conductor said, emphasizing the negative. “Never late. Always on time. Always 6:10.”

Jameson half chuckled at the man's odd way of talking, somewhat realizing that there might be a few coals short of a tender in the conductors head, but boarded nonetheless.