

Mind the Quota

The bell tolled as shrieks and screams pierced the crisp night air. 10:15 had rolled around again and Spencer had failed to meet his quota for the third day in a row. He lay on the floor writhing in pain as the burning sensation traveled up his forearm, chest, then to all of his extremities. Yelling curses and rolling on the floor, Spencer just wanted all the pain to be over. *This is the worst Disciplinary Protocol that I've had in a while*, he thought to himself as the pain began to slowly subside and he regained movement of his fingers and toes. He picked himself off the floor and slid into bed as his forearm sensor displayed the message, "Disciplinary Protocol, Level 2: successfully administered. Quota has been reset."

Spencer worked in the construction district. He was assigned there at the age of 18 because he did not do well enough in high school to earn a job in the office-based districts. Along with the rest of the population, Spencer had been outfitted with 2 biosensors at birth. Small, sticker-like, and permanently attached to the skin, there one was attached to the forearm and another at the base of the skull. Together, they measured every sort of biological data possible - brain waves, heart rate, skin temperature, and even sweat composition. All of it was reported to a database at the Center for Efficient Living (the CEL), where the data was analyzed by a computer program that would eventually spit out an efficiency rating for that particular individual which could be seen on that individual's LCD forearm monitor.

Spencer hated the system. He hated how the Center had the ability to monitor his every movement, how they could transform every one of his days into a single number, and how that number was the only thing that mattered to society. The CEL was responsible for not only reporting this efficiency rating in live time, but also for determining everyone's individual quota, the minimum rating that individual needed for that day. Every night at 10:15 pm, during the Disciplinary Protocol, everyone's quotas were compared to their efficiency rating for that day's work. Failure to meet the quota results in an electric shock from both sensors, ranging from Level 1, the least severe, to Level 3, the most severe, depending on how far below the quota you were that day. Theoretically, these shocks were supposed to discourage citizens from slacking on the job but Spencer knew that the system instilled fear in the population; it made them passive and obedient.

Disciplinary Protocols were routine for Spencer. Standing 5 feet and 4 inches tall with a frail frame and not having a lot of physical stamina, he often found himself moving slowly and tiring quickly. He often wished that he had performed better in high school because he was not built for construction work. It was never easy for him to meet his quota. For the most part, many workers were able to reach their quotas on a daily basis. Spencer, on the other hand, had come to accept the fact that he would receive at least a Level 1 shock every night. However, while these were painful, they did not even come close to rivaling the lasting pain of a Level 2 shock. Level 3 shocks were extremely rare and were only reserved for criminals, rebels, and those who tried to resist the authority of the CEL. Spencer had heard that it could even lead to death.

Spencer awoke the next morning thanks to a small jolt given to him by his arm sensor. He looked over at the clock and saw it read 7 am. "Right on time as usual," he groaned, massaging

his forearm where his sensor had shocked him. The CEL made sure that everyone was up and ready to work at 7 am from Monday through Saturday by waking them up with a low voltage shock.

After his morning routine of eating a bowl of cereal and drinking a mug full of dark, black coffee, he put on his construction uniform and headed to his jobsite, a few city blocks from where his apartment was located. During his walk, he observed how little each passerby seemed to care about one another. They were all just focused on getting to their respective jobs and staying on task enough to be considered “efficient” for that day’s work. It was as if Spencer’s mother had drilled her famous saying into all of their skulls as she had done with him. “Just keep your head down and meet the quota.”

Spencer felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around.

“Hey there, Spence, have a rough night yesterday? I could hear you cursing from next door.”

Joe was another construction worker that lived in Spencer’s apartment complex. Tall, lean, and strong, it seemed as if he were built for the sole purpose of manual labor. He, unlike Spencer, always met and surpassed his quota, and he did his best to remind Spencer each and every day. Spencer was almost sure Joe had never even felt a Level 1 shock.

“Sounded like it was a Level 2 again, if I’m not mistaken. You should really try picking up the pace at work and maybe you can start living pain free, like me. Anyway, see you at work, if you still consider the little that you do to be work that is.” Joe said with a sneer.

Spencer’s mother’s voice echoed in the back of Spencer’s mind “*Just keep your head down and meet the quota.*” “Knock it off Joe,” he grumbled.

Content with his snide remarks, Joe casually walked away, chuckling to himself.

Freaking jerk, Spencer thought, it’s not my fault that I can’t carry as much as him. It’s just so unfair how he can go home every night without having to care about the Disciplinary Protocol at all. Spencer glanced down at his forearm in contempt. This damned sensor controls my entire life and it barely affects him, he thought bitterly.

Work was worse than usual that day, maybe because of the morning interaction with Joe or maybe because he was just tired. Either way, by his lunch break at noon, Spencer was far behind his quota. His efficiency rating was much lower than usual at this time.

How is it fair that the CEL can tell me whether or not I’m being efficient, just from analyzing whatever data they get from my sensors? Spencer contemplated as he quietly ate his lunch in a corner that was removed from his fellow workers. They don’t even take into account the fact that I have to endure crap from people like Joe; to the CEL I’m just my efficiency rating. I’m just a number.

Spencer heard a voice from behind him. “Your rating’s looking pretty low there Spence, have you given up already?” Joe laughed and pointed at the LCD screen on Spencer’s forearm sensor.

“It’s just an off day, Joe, screw you,” Spencer responded through his teeth, fighting back his anger.

“I dunno, Spence, seems like every day is an off day when it comes to you. Guess I’ll be hearing more yelling from your room tonight. Try not to wake me up.”

Joe tauntingly smacked Spencer on the back of the head as he walked away to get back to work. Spencer clenched his fists and teeth out of rage.

Why do I have to endure this bullshit while scumbags like him can live their lives so freely? He is right about one thing though, I'm going to be in for another rough night at this pace.

By the end of the day, Spencer was spent. Even after pushing himself to his limit, it was obvious that his effort was of no use. His efficiency rating for the day was going to fall in the Level 2 range. He rushed home to avoid being teased and bullied by Joe, ran up the stairs and shut the door behind him as he entered his small, crowded apartment. It was 7 pm and Spencer knew he had about 3 hours until that day's Disciplinary Protocol. He made himself something to eat for dinner, and anxiously waited for the ill fated time to roll around.

Dummmmmm,, Dummmmmm

10:15 had finally come. Spencer had been laying on the floor, bracing himself until he heard the bell, the signal that made him reflexively cringe, even on the rare days that he had met his quota. Unfortunately for him, today was not one of those days. His forearm monitor displayed the message: "Disciplinary Protocol, Level 2: initiating in 3,2,1."

The pain seemed to last an eternity. The burning sensation that he knew all too well had flooded his entire body once again, and Spencer hated every second of it. He had bitten down so hard that his jaw felt stiff. His whole body remained tense even after the feeling of pain had dissipated. During the episode, he had heard yelling from an apartment across the street and even from the floor beneath him. He knew that he was not alone in his suffering, yet he felt that the CEL was singling him out for being unable to complete his daily goal. He was in the minority of the population that had been labeled by the CEL as a "low efficiency worker," someone who consistently failed to meet the goal set for them. He knew that, to the system, he was just a number that was lower than his respective quota. He was at the mercy of the technology.

Getting up off the floor he saw the all too familiar line of text displayed on the monitor on his forearm "Disciplinary Protocol, Level 2: successfully administered. Quota has been reset." He was tired of it. He didn't want to be a part of it anymore. He went to sleep with his heart pounding, his body sore from days after days of Disciplinary Protocols. The only emotion that he felt was hatred, hatred for the system and for the CEL.

Spencer jumped out of bed thanks to the familiar zap in his forearm. It was 7 am and Spencer knew he needed to get ready for work, but all he could think about was how angry he was from the events that perspired the night before. He ate his cereal, drank his coffee, put on his uniform and left for work. But while his routine seemed just as habitual as any other day, something was different about Spencer. He had a wild look in his eye and had an aura of determination about him. Joe didn't even bother him on his way to the jobsite. *Just keep your head down and meet the quota.* Spencer heard his mother's voice echo in the back of his mind, and for the first time ever, he pushed it aside.

At work, Spencer did absolutely nothing. He was tired of mindlessly working as a cog in the CEL machine. He wanted to take back his sanity. He watched his forearm monitor display "Efficiency Rating: N/A" throughout the course of the entire day. He was no longer just a number. His co-workers looked on with dismay when they realized what Spencer had decided to do. He was doing what everyone else was too afraid to do.

When Spencer returned to his apartment, he laid himself on the floor. His face was emotionless and cold, but he was heart raced with excitement and anxiety. He had even surprised himself that he went through with his plan. He waited for 10:15 to roll around, counting the seconds that passed by until then. When it finally came time, Spencer was at ease knowing that he had finally left the monotonous cycle set forth by the CEL. He watched as his forearm monitor displayed the text, “Disciplinary Protocol: Level 3, initiating in 3,2,1” ...

A zap from his forearm sensor woke Spencer. It was 7 AM and he had been dreaming. He groaned as he got out of bed to make his bowl of cereal and his black coffee. He put on his construction uniform and left for his job at the construction site, just a few city blocks from where his apartment was located. He heard the voice in his head, *Just keep your head down and meet the quota.* Today was a new day.