“You made a mistake.”

It’s only four words, but hearing them is enough to crater my mood, no matter how I was feeling.

I had just arrived at work, a little later then I should have but it’s not normally a problem. Still feeling a little tired from how early I need to get up, but looking forward to a productive day in the office. But as I entered, the supervisor calls me over.

“You made a mistake. Starting this morning, you will get your work orders from Jean. He will assign them to you, and then you will report to him when you’re finished and he’ll assign you another.”

I was stunned. My mind went blank, unable to try and process what it was I could have done. A person with my seniority, and my experience, being told to work as if I was a fresh newbie.

“W…what was the mistake?” I manage to ask.

“I actually don’t know what it was, just that you made six of them last week. Something about picking the wrong item, and you had a lot of tickets open for a while. Didn’t Jill tell you?”

“N…no, she didn’t…”

“Mmm, well, maybe she just didn’t want to tell a superior that they were wrong.”

That didn’t seem right, but I couldn’t think straight enough to make a response. I could tell that I was already emotionally shutting down. After all, I must have deserved this if it had come to this. Doesn’t matter that a voice in my mind wants to complain about it not being brought to me first, I’m still the same failure that I have always been.

“Well, you can talk to her about it when she gets back. Anyway, have a good day!”

“Yeah, same to you…” I barely manage to get out, as I adjust my mask and head over to my desk to put my stuff down. Once I was done there, I went over to Jean, who was already working on something.

“So, what task do you have for me?” My voice is soft, flat. It’s a self-defense mechanism I have developed over the years. If I just become a quiet drone, then I can settle the storm within me. He goes to the queue, and I stand where I was, straight backed. I must have become conceited, thinking I was capable of more than I was. I deserve this.

Jean comes back in a moment with a printout. It’s a simple task, clearly ideal for me. That’s all I’ve ever been good for. I go and get the items on the order, prepare the shipping paperwork, and have a coworker confirm that the correct items have been picked. All in accordance with our standard operating procedures. Once confirmed, I package the order and prepare the shipping label, and then place it with the rest of the items to be shipped this afternoon.

It’s such a simple job. Anyone can do it. Sure, there’s things to remember about how to prepare and separate some of the items to be shipped individually that is learned over time. Stuff that I have long ago memorized, having worked in this for years. But I couldn’t, and I must go back to the bottom. Where I have always belonged.

My coworkers chatter and joke like nothing has changed. Lunch, a snack, brings a distraction. One of my coworkers comes over and tries to apologize, say it wasn’t her that brought the errors up. I thank her, but it doesn’t matter. What mattered is that a mistake was made, and I must pay the penalty. This is the results of my hubris, thinking that I could be *good* at something. I’ve just been lucky, and luck always runs out.

She tries to console me, but it doesn’t work. Never does, no matter who tries. It’s so ingrained in me to be this way. The only consolation is that I am unable to remain on any emotion for very long, and that I will eventually drift back to neutral.

But this is part of why I make mistakes, obviously. If I can’t dwell on my failings, then I will simply repeat them. The moment they slip away is the moment I will become haughty and trip over myself in the exact same way again. That’s why I must constantly remind myself of my failings, why I must constantly punish myself, because when I don’t the cycle begins again.

The day continues like this. I get a task, I work on it, I report completion, I get another task. Eventually work is over and I go home. But home is not a respite, as I find myself distracted by things that only exist to make me forget my failings, and to keep my mind spinning. So by the time bed rolls around, I am no more rested mentally or emotionally, and I go to sleep to begin this cycle again but a little bit more worn out.

I made a mistake. I may never know what it was, but I have made one. And if I don’t know, then I won’t know how to not do it again, so it will happen again. I compulsively must be perfect; I can’t stand the thought of being rejected by those around me. But I can’t be perfect, and this stress will break me one day. But that day is not today.

I made a mistake.