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PETRI DISH NO. 13

Pihu's mornings always started the same way.

She drank the bitter coffee too fast and started walking to the microbiology building.

It was too early.

The streets were empty, and even the sun seemed hesitant to rise. The sky above the university softly glowed with light gray before sunrise.

Pihu Mehta was a 2nd year Ph.D student, and she was feeling completely drained.

PCR results disappointed her again last night , and Professor Bowen Li's sharp voice was still ringing in her head.

"You waste time , you are using up valuable funding without getting results . If you can't find results, someone else will."

She smiled and nodded that time, but the words stuck. Those words destroyed her confidence.

Her family didn't understand failure either. Her parents told the neighbours about their "brilliant daughter, soon - to - be a scientist". But they didn't know about the nights she cried into her pillow after long lab shifts that only gave her useless results.

Swiping her ID card, Pihu entered the lab. She felt the cold , clean air of the lab, which she was used to, along with the smell of ethanol and the soft buzzing of the fluorescent lights.

Freezers growled in the corners, and the incubator ticked softly. Everything felt normal.

Except for one Freezer. That freezer was very old . It had survived every lab renovation . Nobody dared to unplug it, as if it was a part of the building.

It stood against the far wall, older than the others. Its paint was peeling at the edge. It was covered with dust.

She had seen it a hundred times before , yet never really noticed it. Today , the motor hummed louder . It was like the sound won't be ignored, it was vibrating through the quiet like a warning.

Pihu frowned and put down her mug. She leaned closer. An old piece of tape stuck to the handle, dry and fragile.

She scraped it with her nails & saw some faded writing underneath.

DO NOT OPEN. DR. Srivastava, 1987.

She blinked.

That old warning felt more like an invitation, didn't it??

Pihu heard from some professors that Dr. Srivastava had once worked with dangerous pathogens. But for some accidents that experiment was shut down. Nobody knew what really happened.

Pihu became more curious. What if there was something valuable inside? Old strains, unique cultures - something her project could rely on.

She pulled the door. It opened slowly, letting out a cloud of cold, old frost. Inside, boxes leaned under a layer of ice. She pushed them aside, shivering , until her hand hit something hard and smooth.

A petri dish, wrapped tightly in parafilm. The label was almost covered with frost. But when she carefully rubbed off the frost, She was able to read what was written on it :

NO. 13

She felt a shiver in her chest , mixing fear with excitement. She held the dish carefully, and brought it to her bench.

Under the laminar hood, Pihu watched the dish warm and melt the frost slowly. At first, it looked ordinary : a dull smear across the agar, pale. She thought it was dead. Nothing could stay alive for such a long time.

When she looked through the microscope, she saw that it shined a little, like oil spreading across water. Her eyes twisted.

The colony was moving in a steady rhythm, not just randomly. She leaned back and rubbed her eyes, not believing what she saw. It was impossible, because bacteria that were kept frozen for so many years shouldn't still be alive.

Her curiosity kept bothering her. She really wanted to know more. She set up a simple test. She put a drop of ampicillin on one side of the dish. She expected the classic halo of inhibition by morning.

But instead, the opposite happened. The bacteria had grown thicker, darker, exactly where the drug touched.

"What the....." She whispered.

She tried tetracycline. Then Ciprofloxacin. Each time, the same. The bacteria consumed the antibiotics.

She bit her lip. "That's.... Not possible."

But the dish was undeniable.

By the third day, she noticed something worse. The lid was no longer snug. Beads of condensation traced the edges. When she leaned close, she saw a wave move across the colony's surface, like muscle flexing beneath skin.

After 2 days, Pihu's Lab partner, Rishabh, first paid attention to an unknown smell.

"What's rotting in hell here?" He dropped his bag on the bench. His eyes fell on the dish that was on the table. "What is that?"

"Don't touch it." Pihu said.

Rishabh smiled. "Relax. Probably just contaminated junk."

Before she stopped him, he brushed that with his hand. A thin thread of mud, in the form of persistence, refused to go.

"Hey, it's sticky." He removed the glove with frustration and threw it into the bio-hazard.

That evening, he scratched his wrist and complained of an itching. By the next morning, red blisters cut his skin. Antibiotics did nothing.

On the other hand, Pihu got nervous. She sealed the dish, scrubbed the bench with bleach, and settled everything disposable. She was also sweating.

But when she checked the incubator, the fresh plates that she had not even inoculated, were blooming with the same strange colony.

Biofilm was spreading on its own.

Then the writing came.

At first, the colonies clustered in strange circular patterns.

But at night, the shapes became bigger and clearer. They turned into simple, bold words.

WE ARE ALIVE.

Pihu stared until her eyes went blurry. Fear and scariness filled her heart.

In the meantime, Rishabh's health got worse. His arm turned dark, and skin started to peel off.

The doctors said that it's a "super infection," but no medicine helped. His fever got very high. In the incubator, the colonies kept growing, stronger and more powerful than before.

Three nights later, a storm hit the campus. The dorms and labs went completely dark when the power suddenly went out.

The old freezer didn't turn back on, but the generators tried weakly to start.

When Pihu arrived with her flashlight, the air smelled sweet and rotten. On the shiny, wet floor, a black liquid moved like a living muscle. Slime dripped from the benches. Thin, twisting strands moved like fingers, climbing upward.

When she turned her light toward the door, it was blocked. A faint glow came from the biofilm covering it. Then she heard a sound..... a hiss, followed by a wet sucking noise. The slime started to form shapes, bending and swelling until letters appeared on its surface.

JOIN US.

Her heart beat wildly. She fell backward, knocking over some pipettes. The slime rushed toward her and brushed her shoe, the fabric instantly dissolved. Her skin burned with heat.

Rishabh entered from the other side of the lab. His breathing was heavy and uneven, and his arm was black up to his elbow. "It's... inside me," he whispered. Then he fell to the floor.

Black foam hissed as it touched the tiles, bubbling out of his mouth. The biofilm moved quickly, covering his shaking body and swallowing him whole. Pihu screamed.

She couldn't remember how she escaped. Only flashes came back like tearing off her lab coat, crawling through the storm, and pushing herself through half-sealed vents. She held her notebook tightly, even as slime smeared its pages. It was her only proof. Her curse.

When Pihu woke up in a hospital a few days later, the campus had already reopened. Officials said the lab had been damaged by a chemical spill. Rishabh's death was listed as "septicemia of unknown origin."

Pihu left town. She buried her career, her fear, and her guilt. But she kept the notebook.

At first, the stains on its pages looked harmless — just pale marks that had dried at the edges. But weeks later, she noticed them changing. They were spreading, forming shapes.

Letters.

WE ARE ALIVE.

Outside her window, the city kept moving, unaware that Petri Dish No. 13 had already escaped.

