

Working Like a Dog

A dull ringing pierced the veil of sleep, like a rushing heartbeat pounding through water. Waking gradually, Argos rose from his bed and looked around the room. “I get it,” he muttered, fumbling with his phone until he finally silenced the alarm. “One day, I will have my revenge,” he muttered, staring at the alarm clock.

“Dammit!” he cursed, all but falling out of bed as he began to move. A continuous ache behind his eyes, he took an aspirin before he even ate breakfast. Though he slept plenty that night, he felt dead and heavy. No matter how he focused his mind and tried to motivate himself for work, his brain worked as if within tar, sluggish and foggy. Rubbing his temples, he found the skin dry and flaking. It felt like he had undergone electroshock therapy, but he could not dwell on his lack of thought, as the clock reminded him to hurry.

As he ate a tasteless bowl of oatmeal, his innards felt sticky and fetid, as though he were putrefying from the inside out. Seemingly in response, he saw dark roots spreading from a spot in his food. He felt hot fluid flowing across his upper lip as blood dripped into his food. Covering his bleeding nose and feeling a churning ache inside him, muttered under his breath. “I’m fucking falling apart.” He considered staying home but wanted to save the sick day, begrudgingly starting for his car.

He reached his work without processing the drive. He knew the road like the halls of his own home, knew the *Check Engine* signal eternally lit. At four-thirty in the morning, the parking lot was dead and the building still. Hazy white light shone on the horizon as the sun rose through the smog. The blue-train station lit up in unison as several facilities opened.

“Morning, Brewer. How ya doing?” Kurtis asked, collecting coffees from a stand by the door. The man had a look unfitting in the place. Those forced to spend so much time in the sterile, grey station seemed to inspire nothing but softness and dreariness. Yet Kurtis had the look of one pulled straight from the woods. Over six and a half feet tall and very muscular, he was an imposing figure, his innate intimidation only ruined when one learned how kindly and timid he was. He shaved both his beard and hair and wore a plaid sweater beneath his jacket, even in the summer.

Argos turned sleepily towards him, wondering who in the station would answer positively at that hour. “God, sorry to ask. Brought you some coffee, if that’ll help,” he laughed, seeing the expression. He held out a paper cup, still hot with steam rising from its opening.

“Thanks. I’m fine, just feeling off,” Argos said, accepting it gratefully. It burned his tongue as he took a greedy drink. The rich taste of the cheap coffee immediately rousing him, even if it did not make him feel definitively better.

“Shit, man. Are you sick?” Kurtis asked, stepping back and covering his mouth, ever a germaphobe.

“No, I’m just off today.”

“Might be the harmonia. I’ve heard it’s not good for you to use much.”

“Well, the job requires me to use it. Guess I’m fucked,” Argos chuckled, silently wondering how the tech was affecting him. In the end, he found it more comforting to push the thought from his mind than to dwell on it.

A tunnel at the bottom of the Atlantic. Fueled partially by geothermal heat, the train could hit almost 550 miles per hour; slower than a plane ride, but cheaper, especially for cargo. Kurtis

and Argos were guards of the pillar of human progress, a job far less exciting than the description made it out to be.

“You still playing poker night?” Kurtis asked, the two nearing the office as the night workers slowly trickled out.

“Of course. How else am I supposed to rob you suckers?” Argos laughed, already perking up at the thought of their weekly poker games.

“Hey, you’ll be paying me this time,” he chuckled, pulling a small charm from his pocket — a rusting, crumpled bullet. He held the piece close in a cupped hand, knowing he could get in trouble for bringing unauthorized weapons or ammunition into work.

“The hell is that?”

“Belonged to my grandfather. Sniper shot him on his third tour; helmet saved him. This tough bastard survived two heart attacks. If there’s anyone with luck to rub off, it’d be him.”

“So, he brought that back from war... and you’re using it to gamble in basement poker?” Argos laughed, rolling his eyes.

“Fuck him. I said he was lucky, not a good person,” Kurtis laughed, a twitch in his mouth showing the history between them. “It’s mine now, and I choose where the fortune goes.”

“If you want to finally win and stop being a fish, you need to take some actual risks. You play so safe, we know you only bet when you have something,” he suggested, guiding him in hopes of making an actual opponent of him. “Skill, not luck, determines the victor,” he added, unable to keep a slight cocky smile off of his face.

“I can take control of my luck, not my skill,” he chuckled, carefully putting away the charm.

“Wha— how do you even—?” Argos stammered, caught off-guard by the idea. As Kurtis shrugged away the question, Argos shook his head and sighed, knowing logic useless against him.

“You got the dog today?”

“For the first shift. Mary’s got it in the afternoon,” he grumbled, preemptively annoyed at the complaining he knew would come from her. “At least we’re getting a new kid to help us. It’ll be fun training him, watching his spirit break over the next month or two.”

“Wait, you guys are getting someone new! We’ve been asking for more heads for a year.”

“Well, inspection gets to use flashy tech. We look good.”

“It’ll take a lot more to make you look good,” Kurtis chuckled, stopping as they came to the houndsmen office. “But hey, management does listen to you guys. You think you could suggest they give us more guys? We’ve been working overtime without actually getting paid overtime.”

“I mean, I’ll tell them, but they don’t listen to us either.”

“Thanks. Catch you at the game.”

“See you,” he said, the two giving a limp handshake.

Argos put on his blue uniform, brushing out the wrinkles as though anyone would see him. A slight breeze of dry air brushed past as he buzzed himself in. Even from outside, he could smell dog fur and cleaning chemicals. He walked past the kennels, some of the dogs within watching as he passed. Well-trained German and Dutch Shepherds, they sat dutifully, some shifting on their feet with excitement that he might free them from their pens. At the end of the few cages, his partner hound Artemis whined and pawed at her door.

A German Shepherd with a trace of mutt in her, she had patterns of her breed, but with different coloring. Her usually golden fur had a dirty-grey color to it like the back of a coyote. Her left ear did not change after puppyhood, remaining folded over. Even when upset, her face stayed curled into a smile, showing her never-ending excitement.

Sitting on the far side of the room was the new worker running a cotton swab around the inside of a suitcase, looking somewhat disappointed when it came up clean. He was a blond man who looked surprisingly young for the job, hardly older than twenty. With a slight smile, he hid his interest and excitement beneath a veneer of professionalism. His skin slightly bronzed as if permanently tan, with his sharp-featured face, he had the look of a surfer.

Shaking his head, Argos pushed down his bad mood and tried to give a good first impression. The boy noticed him, turning with an excited curiosity Argos entered only to show him more of their practices. “Morning,” Argos greeted, unsure how to address the boy.

“Hi,” he said, extending a hand, which Argos shook while taking another sip of his coffee. “I’m umm, Giovanni Artino... Gio. I’m the new—”

“Ya, we got a memo about you. Welcome to the team,” Argos said, his smile strained. Interaction always drained his energy, and politeness did not come easily to him. The team maintained an unspoken agreement; this early in the morning, they kept a respectful distance and quiet between each other. However, he wanted a friendly relationship with the boy. He could wait for the job to kill the boy’s excitement and optimism without any help.

“So, you work with the harmonia gear,” Gio asked, clearly fascinated with the very idea of the tech. “Sorry, I shouldn’t just start things that way,” he said, realizing the intensity and obsession with which he began.

“Don’t worry about it, that’ll serve you well. Yup, I’m one of the houndsmen. I’m guessing you will be too. Do you know how to use it?”

“Sort of,” Gio said, scratching the back of his head nervously. “I know how it works, but I’ve never actually seen anyone use it.”

“Well, you’ll find most of us here are the opposite,” Argos chuckled, unlocking the drawer. “A lot of us came from basic security. When they introduced this stuff, we had sink or swim. A lot of us just bailed,” he laughed, remembering only a few years ago when management told them of their so-called upgrades. The drawer opened slowly, revealing the clean, protected interior. Harmonia gear looked sleek and futuristic, even against the modern style of the station. Each consisted of three parts, a halo-like crown covered in veiny lights and several short antennae. Beside each, were two round nodes of similar metal; one had a stubby antenna, the other a ring of unlit blue lights. Delicate tools, they were stored in a locked, softened case, each tagged for one member of the team.

“Smaller than I thought it would be,” Gio said, delicately turning the crown over in his hand with a spark of wonder in his eye. “What’s it like to use?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Argos said, crossing the room and unlocking a kennel door. Immediately, Artemis rushed from her cage, excitedly jumping at him. Despite all her training, the dog was as excitable as a puppy, and only just behaved enough to work for detection. “Only one of the dogs doesn’t have a houndsman,” he said, motioning across the four detection animals. “Vegas will be yours. His last partner left, but he should be easy to control,” he explained, pointing to a well-behaved German Shepherd, named for a black mark on its forehead shaped like a spade.

“We’re assigned dogs? Why?” Gio asked, knowing the technology well enough to find the practice odd.

“Before we used the gear, we had to train with the dogs, found one to match us. Guess this is a holdover from back then,” he explained, fishing through a pile of old documents on a desk. “You’ll need to learn to read Vegas. It’ll be easier with an experienced dog like him, bring him around and get some practice.” Within the coffee-stained notes, he found a small handbook thick with warnings. After a period of heavy use followed by a longer stretch of disuse, it was crumpled and coated in a thick layer of dust. “Be sure to read this,” he said, handing off the guide booklet on the gear. “As much as I’d like to keep chatting, I need to make my rounds. Can you manage here on your own?”

“Of course,” Gio laughed, tentatively opening the door to Vegas’s cage. Even when freed, the dog sat in its cage, cocking its head to the side as if confused. Argos laughed at the reserved animal, Artemis jumping beside him to lap at his face. Both strapped identifying vests to their dogs, marking them as security. Gio completed his faster, rushing as if to prove himself competent. Though, even after securing his leash, he tarried by the doorway. “You mind if I see how it’s done?” he asked, watching as Argos readied the harmonia set.

“Go right ahead,” Argos said, kneeling and giving the dog the attention she was demanding. Artemis pressed her head into his chest, licking his chin as he rubbed her underside. “I know, I know, it’s exciting, isn’t it, girl,” he said, tilting his head back to avoid her tongue. “But we gotta work. Heel!” he commanded, the dog stopping, but still twitching with excitement. Being cooped up in the station left her starved for interaction. Most kept their partners at their own homes. Unfortunately, he and several others lived in apartments that disallowed pets, even if the dogs were not actually pets.

Moving from memory, Argos moved to one of the chairs and prepared his harmonia gear. Like a cushioned office chair without wheels or a swivel, it was a decent seat. However, in a conditioned, he felt sick and uncomfortable knowing what was to come next. Even so, he pushed through and readied the gear.

He spread a layer of gel sealant onto the undersides of the two nodes, affixing them to both sides of Artemis's head, between her eyes and ears. Within seconds, they stuck, fixed in place through her fur; the glue ready to transfer signals from the machines to her brain. He placed the crown of the gear onto his head, adjusting it to tightness. As it turned on, he felt a numbing haze falling over his senses as he turned it on.

"See one in a second," Argos said, looking at Gio as he leaned back into the headrest. He held down the activation button, bracing himself as it hummed. Then, the crown and nodes emitted a high-pitched beep. Artemis went rigid, her eyes wide; Argos's arm fell to his side as he went limp and unconscious.

Consciousness returned to Argos in a rush, more like a train hitting him than a state he drifted into. The first moments of the shift always left him dazed and paralyzed, but they faded quickly. The world drained partially of color; he stood close to the ground, an assault of sounds and smells rushing him. Sensation returned and he stood, looking around the room as readied himself. No matter how often he did this, he never got used to it.

Close to the ground, he looked at his human legs. Shaking himself, he opened his mouth and panted, turning around with claws clicking on the floor. He knew Artemis's body well, used to the quadrupedal stance, and the feeling of fur across his body.

“Holy shit!” Gio marveled, stooping down and looking over Argos in his new body. His face looked strange with the color drained and his peripheral vision reduced. Instinctively, he sniffed, noticing the eggs on his breath and the ‘scentless’ antiperspirant he wore. “That’s you in there, Argos?” he asked, receiving a nod in response. “Wow, what’s it feel like?”

“Aarruurrrroww,” Argos growled, knowing no better way to convey his inability to speak.

“Sorry, dude,” he said, turning his attention to Argos’s now-comatose body. “Though, I guess you aren’t a dude, now,” he snickered. Argos sat and bared his teeth in annoyance, his fur bristling as Gio flicked his human body’s cheek.

With a quick yip of disapproval, Argos pushed through the door and walked into the open station. A wave of sensory information bowled into him, the screeching of machinery inaudible to humans, the sweat of countless people passing through, the food from the stands, and a cacophony of other forces, overwhelmed him. No matter how many times inhabited the body of his partner, he never got used to the alien senses. Every breath told him a story, the people who passed by, what they held, and the cleaner used to wash it all away. It was something he could never quite describe in human terms, an experience not truly his.

In a quick trot, he started towards the baggage, his paw-pads pressing upon the cold tile. His tail wagged as he realized his illness gone. Nothing like aches across the body could make him envy normalcy. He stopped his tail as soon as he noticed it. Motion like that, walking, or how his ears pointed towards sound, they all came naturally, ingrained into the brain he possessed.

On his way to the platform, he passed by the large entryway. Sunlight streamed through the parting clouds as dawn arrived. Every few days, especially when as sunny as this, he would

bring Artemis outside for exercise and play. It was the closest she came to being a normal dog, playing tug with a small length of rope.

He wondered what it would be like, the grass between his claws, the sun warming the black fur on his back. The only time he used the gear was for the job. Though he lacked the instincts or personality of his host, Artemis, he remained curious about the moments beyond inspection.

The clatter of footsteps and luggage snapped him from his thoughts. Crowds poured in as day broke, and with it, his duties. He made his way to the platform, sniffing the air as he crossed through the crowd. Training returned to him as he searched. In this form, he memorized dozens of telltale scents, odors he could only understand or describe in this nonverbal body. Though the dog possessed the nose to find things, a human's mind multiplied the number of tells it could memorize. Their strange partnership worked, even if he could not maneuver himself very naturally.

People gave way as he passed, most too preoccupied with their phones, bags, and tickets to pay him mind. Some looked on with recognition and bemusement upon seeing the gear; others searched for the dog's owner. Though he tried to hurry towards the platform, one of the people stopped him.

A girl no older than eight, catching him off-guard as she grabbed his tail, not noticing his police jacket. He yipped in surprise to find her pulling him, her parents too busy arguing over tickets to see. Not wanting to growl or bare his teeth at a child, he tried to pull away. However, she was persistent, clinging to his fluffy tail like a rope. As if she had stalled for backup, what could only be the girl's younger brother ran over.

"It's a police doggy!" the boy said, instead, petting his chin as the girl stroked his back. In a vacuum, the touch would be quite pleasant. His thick fur parting over his sensitive skin as they

ran their fingers through it. Yet, he had his pride and did not like being treated like a common animal, especially when his coworkers might see him. He struggled to pull away or alert the children's parents without frightening the two. To his annoyance, they laughed and clung harder, thinking it a game. The boy soon noticed the two lit nodes on his head, curiously fiddling with the delicate machine. This was not something Argos took lightly, knowing the child was essentially playing with his exposed brain. With a snarl, he flashed his white fangs and jerked away.

More shocked than afraid, the children backed away. Noticing the parents hurried over clearly ready to yell at the 'savage dog' and its owner. However, they held their tongues as they saw the security vest strapped across him. "What happened?" the father asked the girl, looking around for the officer he thought would accompany a dog.

"It was mean," the girl said, hiding behind her father's leg.

"You shouldn't play with dogs wearing that vest. Can you read that? It means; that dog helps the police," the mother explained, less angered by the hostile dog than her husband. Argos had no desire to deal with the parents, especially a pair unaware of the human-mind controlling the hound. At worst, they would report a security dog on the loose, and he would fill out a short statement explaining that it was him. Better than the fallout of an officer threatening a child.

Before they could inspect him any further, he turned and continued. Passing through security was easy; his identification attached to the side of his vest. It was almost comical, a dog trotting past the already-curling lines outside baggage check. Beyond that checkpoint was his working area.

His nose in the air, he made his way to the waiting area. Immediately, the warm scent of food cooking in the overpriced stands around him. When he first started, the frying oil, sizzling

fat, hundreds of people walking by, and a hundred other odors all distracted him. It was like searching for a speck on the wall while looking into a floodlight. As years passed, the cloying scents grew no less intrusive. However, he learned to distinguish between the odors assaulting him. He could tell the diner's salty beef from the bakery's powdered sugar.

Attuning his focus to the bags of passengers and passersby, he found the world around him fading away. His snout hovering over the bags for only a second, he took things in with only a breath. Tobacco bit his nostrils, accompanied by the metallic tang of batteries, acrid air of alcohol, and hints of foreign spices and food, all buried beneath the ever-present odor of detergent and dirty laundry. Most of the travelers disliked his prying, pulling their bags away on instinct as he sniffed at them, even when he detected nothing of note.

Inspections were boring regardless of the form he occupied. However, Argos found it more tolerable like this. He could learn a great deal about a person by merely passing by them, making almost a game of things as he tallied where people came from. Searching across the platform found him nothing, something he was slightly disappointed by, despite logically knowing it best for everyone when his job revealed nothing.

His round completed; he took to the baggage section. In the dim light of the storage space, his claws clicked on the cold concrete floor, echoing through the spacious facility. He found this search far easier, few distractions, and nothing but an array of conveyor belts and unattended bags. Pacing over the loops, he sniffed over the countless bags. Not until he had almost crossed the warehouse did a curious odor catch his attention. The marker caught him off-guard, waking him from the dull trance he found himself in.

Fur, a distinct but faint smell from one of the suitcases. On its own, it meant nothing. However, it seemed fresher than any simple piece of clothing. Though he could not recognize the smell, the longer he lingered, the more it seemed alive. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but something about the package made the fur on his back stand.

Taking a seat on the bag, he strained his neck and poked a button on his jacket with his nose. He held it for a moment as it lit up yellow and beeped, calling for assistance. After a few minutes, the doors opened and an officer entered.

“Someone buzzed us?” Kurtis asked, stepping into the dim space. He noticed Argos quickly, his ears perked as he waited. “Argos, is that you?” he asked, squinting as approached.

Argos barked in agreement, standing and running his claws across the suitcase. He could have laughed at the coincidence, Kurtis being the closest officer. A yellow signal, it gave his location and called an officer, but suggested there was little danger.

“What is it that you’re bitching about?” Kurtis asked, looking over the nondescript bag. “Get it? Because you’re a—” With a curt growl, Argos cut off the joke and stepped away from the suitcase. “This the one?” he asked looking over the case. “You sure there isn’t anything dangerous?” He received a slow nod in response, Argos relatively certain it was free from explosives or chemicals. “We’ll take a look. See you, man,” Kurtis said, carefully taking the suitcase. He held out an open palm as if to shake, Argos headbutting the hand in his best facsimile of a high-five.

Once Kurtis left with the suitcase in tow, Argos finished his sweep. Time was difficult to track as a dog; his internal clock somehow both too fast and easily lost. When he finished, he returned to his station without incident. His body still lay in the chair, seemingly asleep. At the

desk, Gio read through the handbook with intense focus. In his other hand, was a new harmonia gear, still smelling of fresh sealant and polish.

Looking to his body, Argos focused his thoughts on a single phrase and brought up a paw to his left node. *8820 Disengage Harmonia 8859*, he thought, looking thinking so intensely as to almost hear the words. Triggered by the mind, but created not to trigger from a passing thought, it took focus to use the command.

His gear beeping, he felt the system sending him back. It felt like when one rubbed a balloon against their arm, a fuzzy heat brought on by the static electricity, but running through his mind as his Artemis's body went limp and concentration became impossible.

Light flooded his vision as if he had woken from sleep. Argos looked around, opening and closing his hands as he registered the flood of colors into the room, the feeling of clothes on his skin, and a numbness in his nose. He removed the crown from his head and yawned, relieved to be back in a human form. By his feet, Artemis tentatively raised her paws and looked around, realizing control was again returned to her.

"Thanks, girl," he said, scratching the side of her face. By now, she was used to the process and returned the affection, nuzzling his hand.

"Argos, you're back," Gio said, walking over with his own gear in hand. His intensity was immediate, standing in front of him like a cheerful police interrogator. "Do you think you could help me? I got my—"

"Look, Gio, I'd be happy to help you, but not now. I've been sitting in this chair for hours," Argos said, crossing his legs as sensation returned to him. He all-but pushed the boy out of the

way as he left, fast walking to the restroom. On his way back, he noticed a familiar face approaching their office.

“Yearwood, good afternoon,” he said, meeting her on the way.

“Morning, Brewer,” Penelope said, keeping characteristic professionalism to her. She seemed intent on further climbing through the ranks of the station, taking to heart the idea of dressing for the profession she wanted. A blue suit ironed in the morning seemed permanently affixed to her, worn even to their poker games. She kept her black hair straight, further extenuating her sharp features and resting annoyed-face. Beside her, she led Yin, a black dog with a single white dot on his forehead. The dog seemed sleepy; his head hung low in a permanently bored expression. “How’s it been?” she asked.

“Same as usual, I might have found something earlier in the undercarriage. You might have to fill some things out.”

“Well, thanks for the work,” she joked, clocking in and checking for messages. “By the way, Mary’s not able to come in, something about her kid.”

“Great, I’m doing two shifts then?” he sighed, checking his watch.

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it seems that way. Unless you think the new kid can handle it.”

As if summoned, Gio burst from the office. With a wild look in his eye, he stood hunched over and looked around in a panic. The frantic madness radiating from the boy froze Argos and Penelope where they stood. Before either could speak, he ran off with a shambling gait, not unlike an ape’s.

“That the new guy?” she murmured worriedly.

“Ya. What the fuck happened?” Argos wondered out loud. They hurried inside to find the office in shambles. The dusty pile of papers from the corner of the desk lay scattered across the floor. Lying in front of an empty chair was Gio’s dog. Vegas lay on the ground, unconscious and limp as if comatose. Tellingly, a silver crown sat on the dog’s head.

“Is that—” Penelope started, stunned by the scene before her.

“The crown of a harmonia gear,” he muttered, seeing the technology lit and active.

“So, the new guy switched the pieces around. Now, his fucking dog is controlling him.”

“Yup. God, if he doesn’t get fired, we’re gonna laugh about this for years.”

“Even if he’s fired, we’re gonna laugh about this for years. Unfortunately, this shit’s going to fall on my head, so I’m not in a joking mood.”

“I’m going to go find him before he starts pissing in the bushes,” Argos chuckled, starting out the door.

“Can’t we just call back his mind?” Penelope asked, pointing to the crown. They both knew removing the piece would do nothing, but Gio had fortunately synced his system to the office computer, leaving the drive in the desktop despite the wireless link between the two.

“For that, we’ll need his code. It should be on the leaflet that came with his gear. Good luck on your search,” he laughed, waving to the scattered papers across the room.

“No, Argos, you are not leaving me to find a needle in a haystack!” she called out as he fled and closed the door behind him. “This is not how I wanted to start my fucking day,” she

muttered to herself. At her feet, forms and papers lay in a haphazard pile. Her dog Yin sniffed curiously at the empty body of Vegas.

Giovani shook with his excitement as he readied his gear. After receiving his harmonia set, he could hardly stand to read through an instruction book of information he already knew. Mimicking Argos's motions, he applied a layer of gel to the nodes and attached them to his temples.

"Vegas, sit," he commanded, standing before one of the large seats. The dog stood in front of him, seemingly confused by a command from a relative stranger. "Sit," he ordered again, slower and more forcefully. This time, it understood. Its training returned, watching him dutifully as it allowed him to place crown on its head.

Before even turning on the gear, he held his breath in anticipation of the event. Though far from his job of choice, he had dreamed of using the tech since high school when he saw it released, the chance to see the world from another point of view, literally.

Holding down the button on Vegas's crown, he heard the beep of activation and leaned back, wondering what the transfer would feel like. The node felt hot against his skin, and a tingle seemed to itch at his brain. Numbing needles ran throughout his body, and he saw Vegas fall unconscious. With a sudden jolt, he went rigid then limp.

For a moment, he waited to jump into the head of the dog. Seconds dragged on, and his wait seemed futile, nothing changing save for the warmth emanating from the nodes. Confused, he tried to raise a hand to the machinery, but his arm disobeyed him, remaining limp on the chair. His legs tensed as if to stand, but he stumbled and fell onto the ground.

Help! Someone help, there's something wrong! He tried to shout, but could not even twitch his lips. Baffled and panicked, he hardly noticed when motion returned to his limbs. He stumbled to his feet on unsteady legs like a faun learning to stand. Strangely, his movements occurred entirely outside of his own will, like electric shocks controlling his muscles and forcing motion unnaturally. As his head jerked around, he realized what had transpired.

Somehow, his gear functioned backwards. The mind of his seemingly unconscious dog now occupied his head, puppeteering him with equal bewilderment. *Please, Vegas, just calm down, don't move.* He begged internally, praying the animal could hear him. If it did, it gave no indication.

Gio could feel his heart racing and sweat forming on his brow with fear. His nostrils flared, and he looked around wildly as Vegas clawed at understanding. He willed himself to hold still, his mind straining as his limbs pulled themselves on their own accord. *No! No! No!* Hunched over and feral, he stepped through the door into the light of the station.

Training faded from Vegas's, supplanted with the terror and turmoil of its alien form. Gio screamed out within, noticing the looks he received from passersby, his very stance showing something wrong about him. In the corner of his eye, he saw Argos and Penelope watching him with stunned confusion. His cheeks could not even flush with the burning embarrassment he felt, his superiors staring as he ran past like a frightened rodent.

Quaking with fear and crying internally in shame, he dashed through the crowds, a guttural snarl emerging from his throat whenever anyone got too close. They stepped away in fear, some shouting for security as madness seemed to possess him. *I can't ever show my face.* He realized, shambling ahead, face unhidden from cameras or coworkers. *As if. I'll get fired after half a day.* He lamented, wishing to hide his face as he snarled at a service dog, the owner jumping surprise.

Succumbing to fatigue and shock, Vegas stopped its sprint. It found refuge in a lobby, retreating into a decorative, manicured bushes. Hunched over in the shrubbery, he hid and caught his breath, cursing the dog for embarrassing him so.

Eventually, he saw a look besides confusion and fear from a passerby. *Please, why did it have to be you?* Argos approached him with a concerned, perplexed look on his face. Gio's body flinched, and his mind recoiled, demanding he flee in shame.

"Hey, Gio, you alright?" Argos asked, his voice straining to be soft and calming. Even so, Gio flinched and curled his lips, jumping at the nearness. "Sorry!" Argos said, stepping back and lowering himself in a non-threatening gesture. "I guess it's Vegas in there. Don't worry, boy. You're safe, just come with me," he all but whispered, drawing slightly closer.

Gio allowed him closer, but a low rumble emerged from him as if to growl. His nostrils flared again, and he cocked his head to the side, clearly worried that his nose was not working as well as it usually did.

"Shhh, it's ok, Vegas. You know me, you recognize me, you can trust me. Come on," he said, holding a welcoming hand before Gio's nose.

At first, Gio was glad to find help, hopeful as his legs tensed to rise. However, a pang of humiliation shot through him as his head lowered to the hand. He sniffed it, his tongue darting out to lick the half-curved fingers. Struggling to choke down laughter, Argos raised his hand to pet the side of Gio's head.

With some coaxing, Gio climbed from the bush and started back to the office, Argos eased him with a gentle hand on the back. "Come on, boy. Let's get this shit sorted out," he soothed,

guiding him back and trying to distract from the chaos around them. “And by the way, Gio, you’re never going to live this down,” he snickered.

Halfway back, a jolt shot through Gio. He fell forward, the shock leaving his brain addled and hazy.

“You ok?” Argos asked, lowering down and wavering between concern and comforting. As sensation returned to him, Gio twitched and pushed himself back up. Collecting himself, he realized his automatic movement in his control.

“Argos?” Gio asked, bringing a hand to his mouth as he controlled his own body. Such simple autonomy seemed a miracle after his every muscle was puppeted by a frightened animal.

“I guess Penelope found the code,” Argos chuckled as Gio reveled in the ability to stand on his own.

Sorting out the mess took longer than any wanted to deal with, especially Giovanni. Face red as a cherry, he went through the required questions. Penelope and Argos chuckled the entire time as he recounted the mistake, Argos filling in embarrassing details of how he found him huddled in the bushes. The dog seemed equally disturbed by the event, hiding in the corner like a pup in a storm. Though all the dogs were used to being piloted, doing so itself frightened it.

Once the monotonous paperwork for the accident emerged, Argos left, hoping to seize the last few minutes of his break. Halfway through his sandwich, his phone beeped to signal himself back on the clock. “Just a few more days,” he murmured to himself, wearily checking the date. The upcoming poker game was the only day he had to look forward to. Imagining a night with

friends was enough to raise his mood, but only momentarily. As he started back to the office, he couldn't help but feel as trapped by the job as his dog in her cage. A coming distraction was nice, but he could not shake the nagging truth that it was nothing more.

On his way back, he found Gio on his way out. "You doing ok?" Argos asked.

"My pride won't ever recover, but otherwise, I'm ok," Gio laughed, unable to meet Argos's eyes. "Ms. Yearwood sent me out early. I guess I'm a liability; better than being fired," he muttered, scratching dried gel still on his temples.

"Hey, chin up. We all fuck up eventually, you just got yours out of the way early."

"Does that mean, you all are going to forget about it?"

"Please. We're gonna laugh about this till we're old and grey. Welcome to the team," Argos laughed, patting him on the back as they went in separate ways.

Inside the office, Penelope was tiredly signing papers and placing them in the outbox. As funny as the incident was, it would be a circus explaining to upper management why a worker went charging through the station like a wild animal without getting him fired. Technically, he simply mixed up two pieces of equipment; the rest was entirely out of his control.

"Hey, Argos, did you mark a bag in the loading area today?" she asked, looking over a report.

"Ya. Smelled like fur, gave me a weird feeling, so I rung it in. Did that turn out to be anything?" he asked, looking over her shoulder at the packet.

"I'll need you to sign off on it once you've looked it over," she said. He wasted no time reading through the paragraphs of procedure and legal clauses, trusting that she would not hand it

to him unless it was already thoroughly searched. “You would not believe what was in there. Some jackass tried to smuggle a pair of lemurs in. Poor buggers were sedated and wrapped in the guy’s underwear, and he still claimed he had no idea where they came from.”

“What a weird day,” Argos laughed, picking the packet back up, curious of the details.

“Yep. I’m gonna miss this,” she reminisced, putting away the remaining paperwork for later, and massaging her aching wrist.

“Miss? You going somewhere?”

“Yes... I haven’t told anyone, but yes. Nothing’s official yet, but in two months, I’ll be joining Homeland Security in DC. Won’t be running anything anymore, but the pay is better. I’m gonna take it.”

“Good job. You deserve it. Though, it’s going to be boring here without you,” he lamented, his tone deadening as he spoke. He was happy for her, doubtlessly so. However, he would also miss the company of someone he got along with.

“I know. This place will suck without me... You know, you should find something else as well. What do you even get from this place?”

“A steady paycheck. I’m not qualified for much else.”

“You don’t lose anything for trying,” she offered, putting aside her pen and forms. “Come on. We’ve got to do rounds,” she said, motioning towards their dogs. Artemis lay curled up on one of the chairs. Beside her, Yin nipped at the back of her neck, attempting to play with the tired dog.

“If we both leave, this place will go to hell,” he laughed, making sure the nodes were still firmly attached to his dog. “If no one else, the dogs don’t deserve that.”

“These two are technically old enough to retire; if we push the rules a little. As for the department, I’m sure Mary and the new kid will... take at least a few days to burn everything to the ground,” Penelope chuckled, halting her dog with a hand motion.

“You really want me to leave, don’t you?” Argos asked.

“You’ve got good instincts. You learn quick. You shouldn’t waste your life in this shithole.”

“If you’re willing put that in a letter of recommendation—” he prodded, pushing Artemis from the chair and placing the crown on his head. They were extra-careful in readying the harmonia gear, neither willing to risk another embarrassment. “See you on the other side,” he said, holding down the button until it beeped, and he heard the familiar tone.

Jumping to their feet with a start, Argos and Penelope looked around with the same confusion and unsteadiness which always greeted them upon jumping bodies. Despite occupying Artemis and Yin, there was a familiar glint in their eyes that allowed them to recognize one another. The rush of unfamiliar sensations always left them stunned for a moment.

Instinct seized them in their addled moment, and they sniffed one another’s cheeks. The greeting proved quite pleasant and far more informative. Little scent glands told more of each other’s moods and states, though it was hard to tell what came from Penelope and what came from Yin. Before he could consider it, she leaned forward and licked his muzzle. He stood stunned for a moment, blinking as she walked past and tapped his nose with her tail.

Penelope flirted far more openly in this body. Odd, as they could never manage more than a stray comment in their true forms, even when drunk. He wondered if the body of a male dog influenced her. Pushing the question aside, he followed her out the door and started his rounds.

Searching the station was as uneventful as ever. Argos spent hours pacing circles through the platforms, passing through crowds as they boarded and departed the glossy trains. Once, a case of coca tea gave him pause, but he differentiated it from the drug with a second breath. Other than that, the countless bags proved boring, carried by a sea of faceless travelers.

Hours later, he passed near the station entrance, a cacophony of odors flooding in from the outside. He paused for a second to feel the sun on his fur and enjoyed the moment. Another barking dog swiftly shattered the peace. A uniquely hostile retriever brought in by a family as they sent one of theirs off. He tried to ignore the sound, but the fur on his back rose instinctively.

As he started away, he heard the telltale sound of cloth slapping the tiled floor. He turned just in time to see the dog charging towards him. Fangs bared, he jumped away from a bite, amber eyes wide as he surveyed the area. Caught off-guard, the family was slow to grab their dog, giving it a chance to attack again. Unaccustomed to fighting like a dog, Argos snapped threats at the attacker and dodged away from every strike. He barked and snapped, losing a patch of fur in the spat before the dog's owners finally caught up and pulled it away.

The air stung his fresh wound as he backed away, the family looking scornfully towards him. He already knew his police jacket all-but-invisible to them, enraged at his so-called-attack on their so-called-friendly dog. Fortunately, a colleague came to his rescue.

“So sorry, ma’am!” Penelope said, grabbing him by the collar. He struggled initially at the touch, surprised to see her in human form, and hating being handled like a pet. At the very least, it seemed to keep the family away.

“You people need to control your dogs!” the mother hissed, holding her dog as if the incident scarred it.

“Apologies, I guess he just needs a little more training,” Penelope placated, nodding apologetically and dragging him off, Yin on leash in her other hand. Once they had some distance from the entrance and stood in a relatively unoccupied patch of the station. He made a short, guttural whine in a failed attempt to communicate, and she met his eyes. “I know it wasn’t you, not that stupid. But I’ve already got a mountain of complaints from Gio’s accident. Easier for everyone to tuck tail and surrender.”

Argos nodded in agreement, cocking his head to the side as he looked between her and the door. Automatically, she petted the top of his head and scratched behind his ear. Though it needled his pride, he could not deny how pleasant it felt as she ran her fingers through his fur. If nothing else, he enjoyed a touch from her.

“I know I’m heading out an hour early. Upper management wants me to deal with some stuff at headquarters. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, standing up and stepping backwards. “By the way, I let the janitors in. Your shoes might end up covered in mop-water, sorry.”

With a nod between them, she took off, and he continued on his way. Time was difficult to track in that body, so he took to patrolling an area with several visible clocks. He watched as Gio turned in, leaving the station with Vegas in tow. By then, Argos was all but watching the clock

as the sun set. Artemis must not have slept much the previous night, and he felt her fatigue. Lying near the heater, he basked in the warmth and relaxed.

A plastic plate clattered to the ground, waking Argos with a start. He shook his head and looked around, momentarily confused as he gathered his surroundings. Once he remembered where he was, he started back towards the office. Growling slightly, he chastised himself internally as he looked at the dark sky. Sleep was a physical process, and he knew this rest would provide him no reprieve once he returned to his unrested body. As he shook his head and distractedly tried to enter the office, he attempted to push open the door with his head.

However, the door did not move, and he bumped his head against the metal surface. The bump echoed painfully through his skull, the loud thump drawing a few looks. Barking once in anger, he stood on his hind legs and tried to push the door open, the lock rattling with his futile strength. He growled and snapped several times as if the lock could hear him, looking around for anyone who might have the keys. The cleaning crew gone, his colleagues turned in, he was trapped.

This late, most of the station was closed down, only a few guards and workers seeing passengers through. The dog team would not return until morning, leaving him outside until daybreak.

Pausing, he could have laughed, realizing his stupidity. *8820 Disengage Harmonia 8859*, he thought, looking thinking so intensely as to almost hear the words. Opening his eyes, he expected to find himself in the office with the lights out. Yet, instead, he met the blurry reflection of Artemis's face in the metal-plated door. Confused, he wondered if he muddled his thoughts in the attempt. *8820 Disengage Harmonia 8859* His internal voice as loud and clear as if he were taking exams. Instead, he opened his eyes again to the end of his furry snout.

Whining, he pawed at the receiver node, careful not to move or dislodge it as he pressed the button. It lit up yellow in the blurry reflection, red if he were able to see the full spectrum of color. No connection to the headset. *Shit!* The cleaning crew, he doubted the knew how the harmonia gear worked, likely crown off his head before locking the door.

Fuck! Barking in vain, he threw his side into the door. With no way back to his body, he hurried to the janitorial closet, knowing where they hid the keys. Thankfully, the door was unlocked, and he pushed himself inside. On the upper shelf hidden behind a container of floor buffer, he knew the keys were there, easier to reach for the cleaning staff than the proper spot. Unfortunately, it lay out of reach for a dog. He jumped as high as he could, the tip of his nose a full foot from the shelf.

Growling with annoyance, he gripped the broom with his teeth and maneuvered it as best he could. Standing on his hind legs, he twisted his head and prodded at the cleaning supplies. He knocked over the bottles, made a mess for the staff, but only pushed the keys further back. Mind churning, he dropped the broom and sat, searching for any way to pull them down. Unable to conjure any ideas, his head sunk, and he walked back to the office in defeat.

Drawn to the heat, Argos paced over to the warm vent and curled up. He could do nothing to return to his body. Though his state pained him little at that moment, he knew it would be hell once he switched back. His human body would be exhausted from lack of sleep, aching from lying there for so long, pants ruined as other biological processes continued. All this after waiting for eight hours in the station, occupying the body of a dog. To help the time pass, he pressed himself close to the warm metal and closed his eyes.

Artemis was unaccustomed to sleeping for long stretches, and Argos woke while the skies were still dark. Some part of him hoped he would be back in his body upon returning to consciousness. To his disappointment, he awoke to the dark fur of his tail placed on his snout.

He blew a few hours with sleep, but boredom again set in. He did rounds around the station with half the care and focus he usually applied. However, taking the same walk he always made did little to alleviate the dullness.

Argos wasn't happy here. At the very least, he could attempt to find somewhere else to go. In a perfect world, he would Penelope. But he knew Homeland was in impossible step for someone with his lack of experience and education. Even so, he could try for something better.

Shouts pulled him from his fantasy. He sprinted to the station entrance; ears perked at the sound of a fight. Several other officers noticed the noise, starting in the same direction at half the speed.

The few civilians in the station formed a wide circle around the commotion. By the entrance, a couple shouted and seemed on the verge of trading blows. The man yelled drunkenly about her leaving, his face red as he threatened violence. That was all security needed, several starting forward and warning him loudly as he grabbed the woman's wrist. The others thought him only a drunken idiot making empty threats, but something about him set off an animal instinct in Argos, raising the fur on his back with a worrying tingle.

Padding forward and crouching low, he barred his teeth and searched for any clear threat. Despite being a houndsman, he was a part of security, with instincts and training behind him. There was something wrong in the man's eye, in the way the woman struggled in his grip, something

that put a weight in Argos's stomach. The others did not see it, working to deescalate the situation without realizing it impossible.

Ears flat and tail straight, Argos hardly noticed his stance, instinctively learning from the body he inhabited. Shouting something about leaving him, the man's lips peeled back into a snarl, his animal-half showing. His hand moved to his waist, metal flashing in the incandescent light.

Argos needed no more provocation. Claws clicked against the tile as he sprinted forward, blood boiling as he rushed to stop the man. Vision tinged red, Artemis guided him for the man's throat, but his human half knew better. The man drew back his knife, eyes fixed on the woman in front of him. Argos saw his opening and leapt for it, fangs closing around his arm.

Clattering to the ground, he found his feet and held fast, pulling the man to the ground. The woman fled, and security moved in, half-stunned by the attack. Argos tasted blood and felt hot fluid soaking into his chest fur. Shaking his head slightly, he dragged the man away, predatory urges savoring the flavor. For the first time since he first switched bodies, he felt alive as he fought; heart pounding and skin flushed with heat.

Several other guards sprinted over, pinned the man to the ground and cuffed him, staring at his ragged arm. Argos stepped back, jumping slightly in place like a puppy. He clicked his teeth together and felt blood dripping from onto the floor and coating his paw-pads. Between the taste in his mouth and the sting of a fresh wound, he relished the sensation. He felt strong, excited, euphoric... He felt... cold.

As the high faded, he felt pain biting through him. Glancing down, his chin bumped into a piece of hard metal, the jostle sending an agonizing shock into his core. The man's knife stuck

from his chest, the blade buried in front of his shoulder. Blood flowed freely from the wound, the world growing hazy around him with every second.

Argos tried to step back, but his left leg gave out underneath him. Head whirling with dizziness, he collapsed onto the ground, too weak to rise. No matter how he panted, his breath gave him no energy. Hot blood matted his fur, but he shivered in the cold.

I will not die here, he said to himself, whimpering in pain. *8820 Disengage Harmonia 8859*. He said to himself, trying desperately to flee to a living body. *8820 Disengage Harmonia 8859!* He shouted again as the pain and weakness plunged further. *80 Disintegrate Harmony 89... 8809 Disnate Harmona... Dissnay Harra... desnarha... de ar hera... why's it so dark?... why'sset getting hard to?... it's so tired... i don't wanna die... i don't wanna die... i dun wanns die... idunawanidondie.*

• • •

Argos found himself surrounded by a comfortable, warm, darkness. Weightless and numb, he curled himself into the peaceful glow. Some spark of conscience asked where he was or what had happened. However, the kindness of the abyss drew him deeper, and he drifted away.

A light pierced the ink through which he swam, a warm glow that blanketed his front like a hot shower after a long day. Blinking in confusion, the world came into focus each time his eyes opened. Light streamed into his vision, first in a white pinhole, and slowly expanding into a brilliant golden disk. Azure emptiness grew around it, shifting into a pristine, cloudless sky.

As her body returned to focus, Argos searched around in confusion. After scratching her back in the park grass, she jumped to her feet and looked around. The sun warmed her black fur,

and the comforting scent of leaves and dirt filled her wet nose. A question tickled at the back of her mind, but she pushed it down. So rarely was she allowed outside, and she relished it. With the soil parting beneath her pawpads, she ran in circles around the trees, yipping at the other dogs. Some replied with playful nips and chasing, but she was faster.

Upon stopping to pant and catch her breath, a dog arrived before her, sniffing the sides of her muzzle. Escaped from a leash, the border collie smelled of mud and soap, friendly even for a dog. Something about the situation struck Argos as wrong, but he ignored the feeling and touched her muzzle to his. His tail wagging vigorously, he stepped forward and sniffed under her tail. She returned the gesture, delighted by the attention.

As immediately affectionate as he was friendly, the collie set his head on her back. She appreciated any companionship, starved for such a thing after remaining cooped at the station so often. Making small jumps, he pawed at his neck playfully and she nipped at his chin. As they played, a sharp call interrupted them.

For a moment, she was disappointed, called back by her master. However, it immediately faded as she rounded the corner and laid eyes on them. Just seeing the human always filled her with happiness, her heart filling with joy as her master spread her arms and cooed. Obeying the command made them proud, and that made her jubilant and pleased.

Bounding into her master's arms, she was showered with pets and called a 'good girl,' her tail shaking furiously at the attention. Content as she was, something nagged at the inside of her mind that refused to go silent, even as she pressed her head into her human's chest. The closer she listened, the more her master's heartbeat rose in pitch. As her ears perked up, it sounded almost like the beeping of a machine.