

Working Like a Dog Again

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.

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Drifting back into some semblance of waking, he looked around in a panic, finding only the blank walls of an empty room. Throwing off his blanket, he brought his hand to his mouth, his breath slowing as he felt the tips of his fingers. He was back in his old body, all the familiar sensations rushing back to him. A thin layer of sweat covered him, his joints clammy, and eyes sore. However, the little aches were a relief; he was alive, he was himself.

Confused, he rose, grunting in pain as he moved a needle in his arm. His hands shook as if wracked with unbearable cold, fingers quivering uncontrollably as he fumbled with the tube. Before he could seek out any answers or explanations, the door opened, and Penelope entered. A look of relief washed over her as she hurried to his side.

“Argos, you’re ok,” she said, murmuring a silent thanks as she put a hand on his arm. The tremors did not cease as she ran her hand over his arm.

“I think so. Where am I?” he asked, still looking around as if an explanation was hidden on the walls.

“Hospital, you’ve been out for a few days.”

“What!?”

“Sorry, I didn’t get here any sooner. When I heard you got stabbed—”

“What!?”

“You don’t remember?... You died.”

“What!!”

“You need to stop saying that.”

“You start making sense, and I’ll stop.”

“What do you remember?”

“I got stuck as Artemis. I got into a fight,” he murmured, bringing his hand to his chest as the memories returned, fingertips twitching against his gown. His chest felt numb, alien, as if it should be wounded “What happened?”

“That psycho in the station, you managed to stop him,” she started, clearly nervous about approaching the subject. “Artemis bled out in seconds.”

“How am I alive?”

“You owe Kurtis for that one. He saw your wound, broke down the office door, and pulled you out. You were dead by the time he got you out. Didn’t think the gear could pull you back from that. Probably wouldn’t have if it took a few seconds longer. You took a nasty shock to the brain, and you’ve been out since then.”

“I died controlling her?” he whispered, rising to a seat. Strangely, the fear and shock of the incident did not reach him through his stunned stupor. Instead, his mind drifted to pity. Artemis worked tirelessly for his work. Though puppy-like and excitable, she was well trained, and he could imagine nothing worse than watching as one died, unable to control their own body. He rubbed his head as a persistent pounded the inside of his skull. Looking around, he noticed a sign

above the door to his room. “Where are we?” he asked, realizing it in an incomprehensible mess of symbols. “What language is that?”

“Argos?” Penelope asked, looking back, eyebrows raised in worry and confusion. “That’s English... Can’t you read it?”

“That’s not English. Those are hardly even letters.”

“They... They are. Argos, wait here, I’ll get a doctor,” she said, running out into the hall and calling for help.

“No, what’s happening?” he shouted, reaching for his arm to pull out the fluid tube. His hand missed, fumbling against his arm entirely. No matter how he maneuvered his limb, it seemed uncoordinated, and he could not control himself. Attempting to stand, his legs gave out beneath him, his feet failing to fall where he wished. Even still, his head pounded in pain and his arm spurting blood, vision blurring as his pulse quickened.

Several nurses rushed into the room, hoisting him back into the bed. They gave him several questions and tasks to test his motor skills and mental facilities. His mind remained intact, but his spatial awareness was that of an infant. Most worryingly, they showed him several questions on paper. However, he found them covered in impossible symbols and scribbles.

After an MRI, they realized the malfunctioning harmonia gear had permanently damaged his brain. Scarring his temporal and frontal lobes, as well as bizarrely increased activity in his prefrontal cortex. His motor skills and reading comprehension were irreparably damaged.

“So, what now?” Argos asked, staring at his hands as he received the news.

“We can get you help to manage the impairments. However, nerves don’t grow back, and the damage cannot heal.”

“What will I be capable of?” Argos asked, his gaze on his hands. His hands shook constantly, his vision flat and two-dimensional, and his head permanently pounding with pain.

“With therapy and work, you’ll be able to walk after a few months, not well, but it’ll be possible. After maybe a year, you’ll be able to accomplish simple tasks, picking things up, holding them; I can’t promise anything more than that. As for the alexia, you won’t regain any natural ability to read, but some devices can accomplish this for you.”

“I’ll barely be able to do anything, even after a year... I don’t have the savings for that. Does my insurance cover any of what I need?”

“Well...”

“So, my work won’t give me what I need to get better. But I can’t work without getting better,” Argos murmured to himself.

“There are programs that can—”

“Just... just leave me alone,” he said, lying down and turning onto his side, facing away from the doctor and looking out the slate window.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Brewer; I don’t mean to sound crass. You have my sincere sympathies.”

“What part of ‘leave me alone’ didn’t you understand? You already said you wouldn’t help me,” Argos spat back. He tried to grab a paper cup beside him and throw the water at the doctor, but only clumsily spilled it across the floor.

“If I cannot help the way that I should, there is another option,” the doctor offered, cautiously holding a clipboard to their chest.

“What? You got some kind of mutant serum that’s gonna fix me up or kill me?” Argos laughed, somberly imagining the doctor as some comic villain. However, the man only smiled slightly, almost in invitation. “Will it fix me?” he pressed further.

“That’s what it’s supposed to do.”

The doctor wheeled Argos to the research wing. Where he expected to see others undergoing treatment, there were only glass cages of rats. Two other white-coats glanced his way with amusement and curiosity. They gave him a lengthy psychological exam, excited to find him sane. When he passed, they continued their treatment.

“How many people have you tested this on,” he asked worriedly, glancing between the myriad of vials and serums in the lab’s refrigerators and cases.

The doctor seemed nervous with the question, looking to their colleagues for answers or lies they could tell. “We’ve just entered that stage of development. Technically, we’re still waiting on the ‘go-ahead’ for human testing,” they answered, flipping through their notes as they avoided eye-contact. “However, this version has a zero percent causal mortality among the rats.”

Argos glared back; wanting any words of comfort. “And the human subjects?” he asked, noticing as two other researchers marked down notes about him.

“The... two other human subjects made a complete recovery from his previous injuries,” the doctor reassured. “Though an experimental group of that size is basically irrelevant...” they

continued, coming to a stop as they realized it no longer helping. Argos's grip tightened around the bars of his chair as he was wheeled to a small net of wires.

"I don't know if I can do this," Argos murmured. He tried to rise, but the doctor held him back by the shoulder. "What the hell is this thing!? No more vague hints or half-truths. What am I getting myself into?"

"Biological constructor nanites," the doctor answered, kneeling before Argos.

"The things that print hearts, livers, and stuff?"

"Yes, they reconstitute organic matter; can create limbs, organs, even nervous tissue," the doctor said, running their finger against Argos's temple. "We inject some self-duplicating swimmers. Using a scan of your brain's body image from memory along with your proprioception, they replace what's missing and repair any damage. They only modify you to what your brain knows you should be."

"Do they work?"

"In rats, they've done everything from melting tumors to re-growing entire limbs. In the other guys, they reattached a severed L6 vertebra; they repaired internal injuries. A paralyzed man walked out of the hospital; a hemophiliac survived a brutal beating. In your case... Well, brain injuries are more complicated. But I can promise you won't be in any worse shape."

Argos sat back, half his brain dwelling on worry, the other half excited at the prospect of regaining what he had lost. "Hook me up. I've got nothing left to lose," he said, holding out an arm, wondering how much of his shaking was from fear or injuries.

“If we’re going to, you have to give us a verbal agreement. Are you fully aware of the risks? Willing to waive your right to sue if things go wrong? And, you agree to an NDA concerning every aspect of the treatment?”

“I agree, acknowledge, or whatever it takes to get me better.”

As soon as Argos agreed, the vulture-like scientists swooped in, barely warning him as they lifted him from the wheelchair and onto a seat of their own. “First, we’ll have to attach the nodes, see what your brain thinks you should be,” the doctor explained, producing a set of electrodes not unlike those of a harmonica. Activated, they warmed his skin and sent fuzzy shocks to his brain. Soon after, the monitor beside them began beeping, displaying a series of waves and fuzzy patterns.

The doctor laughed with glee at the feed, the other two nodding with approval. “This is what we were looking for,” the doctor said, pointing to the blue waves dancing over one another like vibrant streamers in the dark. “This is you; your memories, thoughts, feelings... everything.”

“Doesn’t look like I thought it would,” Argos murmured, somewhat awed by the abstract sight. For what felt like hours, they watched the machine through its beeps and waves, the two researchers preparing a syringe of clear liquid flecked with silvery motes. Finally, the meters each reached one-hundred percent. Without wasting a breath, even for a warning, the doctor stuck the needle into Argos’s shoulder. “Warn me!” he hissed, flinching as the cool fluid crawled through his veins like ice.

“Sorry,” the doctor chuckled as he checked a laptop beeping with complex information. His skin crawled, the nanites seeming to whirl within him. “The nanites have an image of what you need to be. They’ll get to work reconfiguring your fat reserves to multiply and repair the nerve

damage. When they're done, they'll break down and be excreted. However, until then, you'll need a nutrient-rich diet and a lot of iron. You can spend the night at the hospital, but no one outside this room can know about this treatment, so they'll want you out."

"Where exactly am I supposed to stay?" Argos asked, raising a shaking hand.

"If you can't take care of yourself, which... you can't..."

"There is someone who can help me. I don't know if she'll take me..."

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"I'm so sorry about this. Kurtis doesn't have a spare couch."

"Don't worry, Argos. I'd like to think that if bad shit happened to me, my friends would do the same," Penelope reassured, patting his shoulder.

"Still, thank you. I owe you everything," Argos said, shivering as he placed a walker beside his spot on the couch. Neither knew how long he would have to stay, but she seemed willing to put him up. He wondered when she was slated to move, but suppressed his concerns. A task made easier as her dog jumped onto the couch, distracting them.

"Don't worry about it, now I have someone to keep Yin company," she joked as the black shepherd rested his head on Argos's lap.

"Glad I can be of use to someone," he muttered, running a limp hand through the dog's fur.

"You'll get back on your feet. And he just misses his girlfriend. Shame what happened to Artemis."

"Don't be. It sucks, but she was a police dog, and it certainly wasn't your fault."

He looked down from her gaze, hating the pity which filled her. Still, he felt upbeat, optimistic even. The doctor's claims seemed more a dream than reality, but he felt good, as if he could sense the little machines working within him. "I'm gonna get better."

Penelope faltered, looking away and starting out of the room. "How, Argos?"

"Well, I'm not supposed to tell anyone about this, but... Docs gave me some kind of nanite serum. They say it's going to repair my damaged nerves based on some kind of brain scan, whole thing seems kind of shady, but I am feeling better. I think it's working," he explained, holding out a hand only slightly quivering.

"So, what? You're in some kind of secret experiment, with god knows what running through your veins? Who the hell are these people? Do you have anything besides their word for evidence?" she asked, clearly worried by the claims and already starting into her detective-mode.

"Look, I'm not even supposed to tell you that much. Please, don't go poking your nose into things," he begged, quickly realizing this would not be enough for her. "They showed me the files from previous experiments."

"And?"

"And..." he began, knowing what followed would only incite her further. "And, because of the damage, I can't read."

"Oh, well, I've never heard anything more legit in my life."

"Is there anything I can say to get you to drop this?"

"No, but I'm smart. They won't know about me, and they definitely won't know you were involved," she assured, patting his shoulder and leaving the room.

They ate a quiet dinner that night. Moving still in Penelope's mind, she looked to finish off her stocks of food. Rice and canned beans served well for empty stomachs. The act took a great deal of time and concentration from Argos, the spoon shaking in his hand. At first, Penelope tried to help him, but he shook her off, wanting not to be a burden.

"You mind if I ask," she began, parsing her words slowly as she considered them. "They say; Artemis's heart was already stopped when Kurtis pulled you out. What was that... Did you feel anything?"

The question gave him pause. Recalling the experience only left him uneasy, and he avoided doing so. "Honestly, I can't tell you much, my senses kind of died with her's," he said, straining at the foggy images. "Actually, I remember something else. It's distant, but I remember the smell of grass, the warmth of the sun... I don't know."

"What do you think that was?"

"I'm not sure, but it became clearer when Jesus stood before me in a brilliant light and said: *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great here in heaven*—" he joked. "No, it was probably just dream from my brain cells dying."

"Well, you scared the shit out of us," she said, taking his bowl.

"Didn't know I mattered so much to you all."

"Give yourself some credit," she said, leaning down and touching her forehead to his. He flinched at the touch but quickly leaned into the warmth.

As quickly as she initiated the touch, she pulled away and left him on the couch. He stood stunned for a time, not moving until he heard her bedroom door open and shut. Sighing, he lay

down and pulled a blanket over his chest. Only set to leave, did she return the affection he had always secretly held for her.

Lying on the rough couch, he waited impatiently for sleep to take him. Worries and thoughts of his treatment whirled through his head. His nose ran and felt stuffed, yet his sense of smell seemed to be in overdrive, the soap from the floor, and sulfur in the water filling his nostrils. Yawning, he pushed aside the thoughts and closed his eyes.



The days that followed passed like molasses, Argos doing little but watching tv on the couch. Relieved, his pounding head pain dulled to a faint ache behind his eyes, his shaking noticeably calming. However, a subtle ache throughout his body soon replaced these symptoms. His body hair grew swifter as well, prompting sasquatch jokes from Penelope as he shaved what almost seemed like fur.

Several days later, they drove silently back to the hospital. A palpable tension hung in the stagnant air of the car as the late-afternoon sunlight streamed in. Argos felt better but worried that they were only misplaced hope. He unconsciously rubbed his sore bones and running his fingers through the thick dirty-grey hair on his arm.

“Remember our deal, don’t go poking your nose into this trial. It’s my ass you’d be risking,” Argos said, putting his hand on hers. Strangely, he noticed his nails almost entirely black. He curled his hands into loose fists, scraping at the discoloring, to find it a part of the nail itself.

“Come on, I wouldn’t dream of looking into the dealings of such an obviously evil group of Moreau’s,” Penelope replied sarcastically. They both smiled at the warmth, pleasantly caught off-guard.

He climbed from the car with his walker and entered the hospital, Penelope driving off to park her car. Taking the elevator to the research wing, he met the doctor. “Perfect timing, Mr. Brewer. How are you doing?” the doctor asked, searching through a folder for his file.

“Good, my shakes have been better. Been eating like a horse though,” Argos said, holding up a hand to show his progress. “Achy though.”

“Good to hear,” he said, jotting down a note as he observed. “Increased nutritional needs are to be expected. As for the muscular pain, I would guess that your lack of movement is causing some minor atrophy, the nanites fighting the process just as fast,” he guessed, clearly perplexed by the symptom. “All seems to be well, so I doubt this will take long. We’ll just need a quick scan to see the state of the nanites.”

As Argos entered the hospital, Penelope made a show of driving off. Once parked near the hospital, she switched into unassuming clothes and a baseball cap. Keeping her face down, she entered the building and made her way to the stairs. Though moving quickly, she took care to look extremely mundane, drawing little notice and leaving fewer memories as she hurried for the research wing.

Footsteps clicked down the stark hall as she picked up her place. The occasional stranger cast her a lingering glance. She hurried, knowing herself out of place here. Rooms locked with digital card scanners, but she noticed a doctor leaving the break room. Seizing the moment, she put a hand on the closing door, relieved to find it empty.

She looked quickly through the room, opening drawers, and searching the corners of the office. No matter how secure a building’s defenses, she knew it susceptible to human stupidity and

laziness. Atop the cabinets, she found her prize; employee access cards stashed in case someone forgot theirs. Back at the station, she knew her team kept a few spare keys beneath the coffee machine. She chuckled as she searched through the cards, similar mistakes always appearing.

Once she found and pocketed Argos's Doctor's card, she left, making her way to the offices. Searching around carefully, she made small circles around the space until alone. She swiped the card and darted in, shutting the blinds of the large office and starting her investigation. Her heart pounded as she moved, paranoia and exhilaration pushing her search as she jumped at every creak. The large room looked eerie and blank, walls without decoration and desk unnaturally pristine and empty. The only mark of an individual's presence was a series of certificates, diplomas, and awards within view of his chair.

The laptop was unlocked, but mostly secure. With little time, she indiscriminately snapped photos of every form, document, and file she could get her hands on. Eventually, the tension and worry of her search weighed too heavily upon her. Arbitrarily, she figured herself out of time and hurried to the window. Once sure the halls were clear, she hurried out and started back to the car.

Penelope's stomach felt like it was climbing up her throat as she rushed from the building. She became incredibly aware of the many cameras around the halls. With her head down, they wouldn't know her face, but she had to escape before someone looked at the footage. Every glance and sound made her flinch, imagining herself caught.

The elevator ride seemed to take an eternity, her heart pounding in her ears as she drifted upwards for what seemed an eternity. She closed her eyes as the door opened, almost expecting to be shot on the spot. Instead, she met with the bright light of day streaming through the windows. Almost running, she passed a security guard by the door and rushed back to her car.

She sat panting in her car, closing her eyes and resting her forehead against the wheel. Her breath slowed gradually, pulse abating as the excitement faded. Had she kept calm, she suspected she could have avoided as much attention. Cursing herself, she looked back at her phone, chuckling at her poor performance as a spy. With luck, she would never need to again.

The sky turned red as the sun set before her, a darkness gathering behind her back. Scrolling through the documents, she found most meaningless or indecipherable without context. She knew them something she would need to look at later in greater depth. Eventually, she found several sheets which seemed to concern the project. Most were gibberish and jargon, but a certain email caught her eye, a mention to a colleague about a file of 'Failed Subjects' in the lab.

Noticing Argos from the corner of her eye, she switched her phone from photos to sudoku. Stepping from the car, she greeted him with a smile and helped him into the car.

"I don't see any stolen files. I guess you didn't break in," Argos chuckled, clearly distracted and giddy.

"Please, you think I'm going to risk my hide for your bum ass?" Penelope laughed, uncomfortably shifting her phone in her pocket. "So, what did the quack tell you?"

"Nothing specific. Said that the healing would speed up." He seemed worried, feeling at his sore jaw, which pushed forward slightly. "I don't know. He seemed a little confused when I brought up the side effects. Just said that I might notice some nodules or shifts as nanites worked." He ran his hand over a thickening layer of hair on his arm. "Also said hair and nails would grow faster as my body goes into overdrive."

They drove in silence for a time, Argos staring out the window as the sky turned black. Streetlights and windows lit up in rows, a noticeable air around him as they hobbled into her apartment. As he sat on the couch, she put a hand on his back, making him jump with surprise.

Sighing, he saw silent questions filling her eyes. “I don’t know what’s wrong,” he admitted. “I just... don’t feel right. Like I’m not being fixed, but changed... If every broken part of me is replaced, how much of the original me is left?”

Caught off-guard, she crouched down and embraced him. “You’ll never completely forget this, Argos,” her voice deadly serious as she drew back. “Even if they aren’t visible, you’ll carry scars from this. But scars are proof that you’ve healed, not that you’re hurt.”

“I hope you’re right,” he murmured, running his hand over hers. “Thank you. I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t here for me.” She gave no answer, putting a gentle hand on the side of her face. Overtaken by the moment, they leaned forward and let their lips meet. Argos’s fear and worry washed away, forgetting everything as warmth enrobed them. Penelope felt less a warmth and more firecracker, sparks cracking and breaking walls built so long ago that she forgot their presence.

As swiftly as the moment began, Penelope took a step back. He looked up at her, but she cast her gaze down. He opened his mouth to speak, but she turned away and walked to her room. Alone in the dark, he chuckled hollowly at that brief glimmer of happiness. Looking down at his hands, he froze with returning fear.

The change was slight but significant enough to recognize. His fingers were shorter than they should have been, retracted slightly into his palms, each tipped with overgrown black nails, almost animalistic. “When this is over, nothing will be left of me,” he whispered to himself.

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After a few days of nothing, they came to an event he had been looking forward to. Argos dared not consider how he would play in his state, instead simply excited to interact with his friends.

“I hope you know, I don’t take mercy on cripples or heroes,” Penelope joked, driving the two towards Kurtis’s home. “Consider the money you lose, your rent.”

“Well, when you lose, I hope it doesn’t warrant my eviction,” Argos chuckled half-heartedly, his head rested against the cold glass of the car window. He wore a long-sleeved shirt despite the heat, hiding his hands from others and himself. When last he examined them, callouses on his palms had turned black. The mutations on his hands turned his stomach with cold fear and disgust for his own form. It was easier to hide them, ignore them, keep them from becoming real.

The car turned from the fields onto the long, dirt driveway. An hour from town, the house belonged to a conductor from the station. He enjoyed their games, his home in the country providing a secluded meeting place for the group.

“Once this wound has scarred over, I need to show you the newer model of harmonia I got from DC. These little things have much faster transfer rates than ours,” she offered, looking to lighten the conversation.

“Good for you. I think I’ve had enough of those for a lifetime,” he chuckled.

They parked the car beside several others and made their way across the old, creaky wood of the porch. He moved slowly, supporting his shaky legs with a metal walker. Lit by dull, yellow bulbs, the living room table already equipped with chips, cards, beer, and pretzels. Members of the

defense teams sat around discussing the job and their lives, waiting for others to arrive. There seemed a warmth to the room, born from the quiet kinship and enjoyment filling the air.

“Argos, good to see you standing,” Kurtis greeted, walking over and giving a brief hug.

“Good to be back,” Argos said, returning the gesture. “I hear that I have you to thank for my continued blight on this earth.”

“I guess. Honestly, my mind was going so fast that I was hardly thinking,” Kurtis admitted, scratching the back of his head nervously. Some raised eyebrows at the contradiction.

Even so, thanks,” Argos said, smiling as he sat at the table. As the final two cars pulled in, they counted eight players, more than usual. After the recent incident, many wanted a night to relax with friendly faces. “Hey, Gio, guess your fully part of the team, now,” he said, recognizing Giovanni as the boy stood by the window.

“Yea, figured it was the best way to get to know my team,” Gio said, shifting around in his chair. He spoke of socializing almost like a task, clearly uncomfortable. Nervously sipping from his beer and searching around. “How are you doing since the...?”

“I’m fine. I might be shaking, but I’m not shaken,” he said, forcing a confident smile as his quivering hand failed to crack open a can. “You ok?”

“Good, just never been a party sort of person. Not sure what to do,” he explained, shifting his chair closer to the familiar person, back stiff as he tried to force relaxation.

Once everyone acclimatized, they gathered slowly around the table. Even as the game began, little conversations bubbled up between them. The old house creaked in the wind, smoke of cigars and heat of the crowd offering the comfort of a hearth fire on a cold night.

“Alright, we got some new faces here, so don’t mind me going over the rules one last time,” Kurtis began, standing at the end of the large table. “First, you do not talk about Blue-Train Station Security Poker Club,” he said, pausing for a laugh that never came. “Second... Fuck it. It’s Texas Hold ‘Em; honor system on cheating, we all have to work together after this. Fifty-dollar limit, we all know how shit the pay is, so let’s not bankrupt anyone. Third, have fun.”

The first few hands took a while, most talking more than playing. Most played safe, relearning one another’s strategies. Kurtis proved the exception, playing more brazenly than usual. Gio played especially poorly, too wrapped up in probability to read the actual players. Argos folded most of his hands, even his winners. His stiff, concealed fingers could hardly manipulate the cards, forcing him to fumble with them until he saw the number, often accidentally revealing them to the others. He found sitting difficult, the base of his spine irritated by the position.

Argos had a skill for reading people. Soon, he met eyes with Penelope, forming an unspoken agreement. Using glances and looks, he helped her make the best bets, only playing low himself.

“Bring it on,” Argos said, pushing his bills forward.

“Bring it on...” Gio murmured, almost unconscious from drunkenness. A few snickered at his slurring, amazed at how little it took to bring him to this state. “Genghis Khan... Wrath of Khan... Did I win?”

“Poor little buddy, this is gonna hurt in the morning,” Penelope giggled, watching as the kid missed his face with the beer can.

“Focus, Kurtis,” Argos said, looking back to their hands.

“Play me off, Gio!” Gio called to no one in particular before collapsing face-first onto the table, spilling several cups across the antique table.

“Fuck,” the owner hissed as the players started pulling their things from the spill. Argos sighed, wondering how the bet would have turned out as the cards were haphazardly collected back into the deck. As he took back his money, he found his hand still, controlled. The moment flooded him with a rush of joy, but he did not celebrate, knowing it could be a fleeting mistake of the moment.

Interest in the game died down, a tray of wings about to come out of the oven. With his difficulty walking, Argos sat back, joined soon by Kurtis.

“You doing good, man?” Kurtis asked sincerely.

“Better by the day. Good is still a stretch,” Argos muttered, the base of his spine and his hands aching. “I’ll be back soon enough.”

“Will you, though?”

“Yea, I’m going through treatment, the shakes will fade.”

“Even if that’s true...” he started, clearly suspicious of even the first claim. “Do you really want to come back. I hear you’re living with the ice queen now. I’ve also heard that she’s packing up. Are you gonna go with her?”

“It’s nothing like that. I just sleep on her couch.”

“If you say so.”

“Hey, buddy, if I was getting any with her, you’d be the first to know.”

“So, she’s available, then?”

“N, No... Like you said, she’s leaving soon, so...” Argos stammered.

“Sure, there’s clearly nothing more between you two,” Kurtis chuckled, leaning back and looking out of the window. This far from the city, the stars shone through the darkness, twinkling above like a scattering of little pearls. “Look, man, you do you, but don’t lie to me, and don’t lie to yourself.”

With a soft chuckle, Argos looked out across the dark fields, grass waving in the wind. “This is so high school... I like her, but I don’t know if it’s mutual. I live with her. I can’t make it weird, give her more to worry about when she’s moving. Hell... she pities me... I don’t know.”

“Shit, dude,” Kurtis murmured, patting his friend’s back. “I’m not a psychologist, but if you don’t let her know, you’ll keep questioning things for years.”

“Thanks, man,” he murmured, thinking over the advice.

“Of course, if you ask, she might reconsider a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. One or both of you are fucked no matter what you do,” he continued, receiving a glare. “If you do end up staying, your position is safe.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think I’d want to go back. Not sure if I can still use harmonia. Even if I could, it’d be weird. Harder to move to a new borrowed body.”

“Well, good luck with whatever you decide to do,” Kurtis offered. “How about some food?” he asked, the platter of wings landing on the table.

“Please,” Argos remarked, feeling perpetually starved. The scent of the chicken filled the room, unusually strong in his nostrils, meat and sauce making his mouth water. He snatched a

wing, but it immediately fell to the floor. “Shit,” he murmured to himself. Crouching down proved difficult, but as he reached for the food, his fingers refused. Drawing his sleeve back, he froze. In hiding his hands, he intentionally avoided peering at the skin-crawling changes. Yet, at that moment, he was met undeniably with fingers shortened into his hands, palmed covered in rough, dark skin.

Panicking, Argos hurried to the bathroom and slammed the door behind him. Before the mirror, he tentatively pulled back his sleeves. Though braced for the worst, he flinched at the sight. Changes had progressed further than he acknowledged.

Twisted and warped beyond recognition, his hands, if they could even be called hands, hardly looked human. It looked like his fingers had retreated one joint inwards. Black nails grew thick and long, palms rough and discolored with callouses. Shuddering, he struggled to pull his sleeves up, mind whirling with terror. Touching the mirror and panting, he looked into his own eyes; irises now tainted with a hint of yellow.

Disgust and baser instincts compelled he run, but he knew it impossible to escape his own body. A cough rose from his throat, his chest heaved, and he heard a clinking in the sink. A tooth lay fallen in the basin, at which he looked in disbelief while running his tongue over a replacement poking through his gums.

He fumbled for his phone, but his paw-like hands shook with fear and disgust. Unable to hold the device, it fell to the floor. Though difficult, he managed to lift it with stiff fingers and call the doctor. At night, he only reached an answering machine, leaving a panicked plea for help.

Heart pounding and skin-crawling, he knew he had to leave. With his wrists, he opened the door and made his way back to the living room. Entering the warm din of the meeting, he took a

breath and buried his outward fear. Barely concealed, he still carried a nervous look, his face pale and sweating.

“We need to go!” Argos said to Penelope, stumbling close to the table.

“What’s up?” she asked, the sound dulled by the din of the room.

“Come on, man, game’s not over,” Kurtis prodded, taking his hand.

Struggling and pulling away, Argos raised his voice. “Let me go! I need to leave,” he hissed, drawing his hand back as he brought a yelp from his friend. His sharpened nail left a shallow cut on Kurtis’s hand.

“The hell!” Kurtis cursed, stepping away and examining the injury.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—” Argos started, pulling his hands deeper into his sleeves.

“Thanks for having us. But we should get going,” Penelope interjected, stepping between Argos and the party.

They offered swift farewells and took the car, driving off into the night. Argos shifted in his seat, his tailbone aching uncomfortably like a sore muscle. Penelope watched him more than the road, worried as he ran his fingers through the thick, greying hair on his arms.

“I’m not doing okay. I’m not getting better.”

• • •

One day. Penelope managed to get that much from Argos. They spent the night in a panic. He had spent the preceding days ignoring changes, the realization of their extent crashing upon them. She knew the doctors were hiding something, unwilling to give him over without

information or leverage. He feared that every passing moment took him further, sacrificing life or humanity.

When she left, Argos was left curled up on the couch, fearfully examining another fallen tooth. Her mind worked quickly, heading out before sunrise. The first step of espionage began simply enough, if strangely; the pet store.

As dawn cracked on the horizon, she sat on a bench near the hospital. Wearing only street clothes and a hood, she opened a small box of tools. Inside the cardboard, a rat pattered about, exploring its little space. Stealing from a pet shop was one of the strangest things she'd done. Registering a rat as a pet or purchasing one was a paper trail she could not afford. Instead, she snatched one when the shopkeeper looked away.

Hidden by her hood, she donned her harmonia crown. The rat squirmed in her hand as she picked it up. A single node sent by her new employer, smaller and longer-ranged than the station version, she attached it to the animal's forehead. It looked like a silver bead stuck to the animal's skin, bearing a faint white light on its center. With a breath, she let it go and watched it scurry off through the grass. Lying back, she pulled her hood up to conceal more of her face. With a breath, she reached up and pushed the button on her crown.

For the briefest moment, Penelope's mind occupied and split between the two bodies. Two sets of senses flooded her, and she spun through spacelessness. Even when she landed in the rat's body, she stood stunned for a second, reeling at the sudden shift.

Once recovered, she looked around the space. The grass stood taller than she, her ears and nose more sensitive than ever before. Experienced only with occupying a dog, she was surprised

as her eyes took in only green and ultraviolet light, the vibrant field stretching below a glimmering sky. Ingrained instincts reeled against the openness and glare of the sun. Running felt odd, her short legs moving too fast for her round body as she darted through the massive stems and pebbles. For a little, the change felt pleasant, sun and grass running through her soft, white fur.

Passing her human body, she assured that she seemed to be asleep before scurrying towards the hospital. Distances seemed so much greater, her short bursts of motion barely bringing her closer to the hospital. Eventually, she felt cold concrete under her paws and stuck to the shadows, creeping in through the open doors.

Her vision hardly reached the distant corners of the building, the pungent odor of cleaning fluid and sickness assaulting her nostrils. Even on the edges of the smooth tile, she felt exposed and lost. Taking a gamble, she started for the backpack of someone on a bench. Manipulating objects proved difficult with her teeth, but she forced open the zipper and crawled inside. For a while, she waited. Her swift heart pounded, and she quivered with anticipation, nervousness compounded with the animal's fearful nature. As she pondered leaving and searching for a way down on her own, the entire bag shook and shifted; lifted as the man started walking.

As they reached the staircase, she poked her nose from the bag and crawled out. Tumbling from the high bag, she squeaked in panic and struck the hard floor. It left her stunned for a moment, side aching from the impact. Thankfully, none noticed her, and she rose to her feet. Incandescent lights glared in her wide vision, but she found the stairway down.

Descending proved more a matter of tumbling than climbing, but she made her way downstairs. Wafts of odd air met her as she neared the research wing, strange drugs and chemicals becoming stronger as she reached the floor and began towards the lab. Searching from memory

proved difficult, her size and senses confounding the images in her mind. The early hour provided cover at least, the halls and rooms unoccupied, the lights dark far above. As she made her way to the lab, the loud footsteps of a human made her fur bristle. Fortunately, as she reached hid behind a trashcan, she saw a janitor working in her target lab. Distracted by his music, he held the door open, unwittingly inviting her in.

Scampering forward, she rushed with panic, legs burning from the exertion. Claws met the lab's cold linoleum, her heart soaring as she flitted between the man's legs and into the room. Nose twitching, she hurried for cover, wondering where the reports might be hidden. Her thoughts and stride were interrupted suddenly as wind rushed over her back. She squeaked in surprise as she heard a shifted behind her and sensed the janitor reaching over. A clash of instincts and unfamiliarity with her form froze her for a second too long. The broom crashed down upon her, driving away wit and pinning her to the ground.

Clawing at the ground with panicked fury, she scrambled desperately but gained no ground. *Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!* She squeaked and struggled as two fingers pinched her tail. The weight lifted from her back, but she was just as quickly held aloft by her tail. "Someone avoided the traps, eh," the janitor chuckled. Writhing and squirming, she flailed before the man, unable to lift herself enough to reach his hand.

The man paused a moment, clearly wondering how to deal with the caught vermin. Nose twitching, Penelope considered fleeing back to her human body, Argos's incident leaving cautious of dying I another body. However, she knew a chance like this would never return. She could not enter in her true form, having seen a guard at the staircase entrance, stationed after her last investigation. Struggling hopelessly in the man's grasp, her heart raced as prey instincts gripped

her. Some shred of sense shone through, and she calmed herself. Flailing like an animal would gain her no purchase, but as she held still, he noticed the node on her skull and furrowed his brow.

“The hell is that?” he muttered, holding her closer and poking at the node. Forcing down the urge to bite at the digit, she reached up and grabbed at him with her front paws. Perplexed, he released her tail as she climbed onto his hand. Head turned sideways, she watched his expression, biting into his thumb as soon as he relaxed.

Blood filled Penelope’s mouth as her large incisors sunk through flesh. Yelling out in pain, the janitor swatted at her, but she jumped away. Shrugging off the fall, she scurried under the desks, legs pounding as she sprinted. A loud clatter followed her, wind rushing through her fingers as the man threw aside chairs in the chase. Though her vision lacked, she saw a wide darkness before her. She bound into the open cabinet, feeling her way forward with her whiskers and nose. Though unfamiliar, the new senses proved powerful, a vague image of the space filling out in her mind as her ears and nose twitched, whiskers brushing against the sides. In front of her was a fishbowl-like glass container of lab rats. Using stored equipment, she climbed over the box and leapt in.

Light flooded in as the door opened, the reddened face of the man filling the aperture as he hunted. Penelope turned away, her head low to hide the node. Hidden among others of her kind, the man’s eyes passed over her, and he continued searching. “I’m never finding that bastard,” the man spat, searching through other connected cabinets.

The sounds of the janitor’s search soon died down, silencing as he finished cleaning and left. She allowed herself a moment of celebration, respite as her heart slowed and her breathing eased as she relaxed. Her borrowed instincts agreed, and she ruffled her fur calmly, sitting in the

safety of the dark and others of her kind. One of the other rats approached, sniffing at her face and chittering in welcome. She returned the greeting, noticing the identifying array of scents on the others. Looking around, she froze and realized her mistake. High glass walls surrounded her, trapping her just like the others.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, she cursed internally. Claws scraped against the glass, but she could find no way out. Her panicked squeals took on newfound desperation, scratching away until she collapsed panting. Curling up, she turned her face to the sky, unwilling to admit defeat, but unable to find a way out.

Curious of the stranger, the other rats approached and sniffed at her. Rising to her feet, she mirrored the motion, her new form wanting to think with her nose. They showed something akin comradery, nipping at her ears and scampering away in play. She would have giggled, her whiskers brushing against another's, their scent telling her of their mood and identity. Their warmth comforted her, easing her mind enough to think. *Whoa! Stop that!* She thought, squealing loudly as a rat's sniffing got too close against her rear.

The rat retreated at her reaction, clearly understanding her warning. She ran her whiskers against the walls, pacing as her mind worked. *I will not be kept in some cage!* She hissed to herself, scratching the bedding on the floor. It took time, but she pushed the litter into a pile in the corner. Food pellets and woodchips formed a sizable hill, and she stood on her hind legs atop it. A powerful jump brought her close to the rim, but just shy of escape.

Clicking her teeth, she approached the overly friendly rat. Their whiskers meeting, she briefly touched her nose to his and stepped back. Predictably, he followed after her, the two nuzzling one another's necks. Playing coy, she scampered away, leading him to the hill. He

followed her tail like a lure, easily lead to the crest of the mound. He placed his front paws atop her, but she swiftly stepped away. *Sorry, but that's not what I wanted from you*, she thought snidely.

In a quick bound, Penelope jumped onto his back, using it as a springboard to finally reaching the rim. Only her front paws crossed the threshold, but she would not fail so easily. Scrambling and straining, she pulled herself up and over the glass. Knocking over a case of beakers as she fell, she shook her head and recovered. Nodding once to the case of still-trapped rats, she crept from the cabinet and began her search.

Climbing atop the counters proved difficult, but she learned quickly. She picked up her pace, wondering how much time she had until the doctors arrived. Fortunately, rats saw well in the dark. After some searching, glancing over a lot of files, she found what she was looking for.

Failed Subjects Reading proved difficult with her wider eyes, but nothing focus could not overcome. Skipping past rats in the early phase, she found the humans. *Shit!* She thought, walking along the table to read. The lies showed themselves immediately. They told Argos that he was the third subject after two successful human cases. However, she quickly found the file on a third subject, Anthony Greene.

The subject admitted with nerve damage and broken bones after a significant industrial accident. Nanites applied after physical examination.

Initial examinations are promising. Though nerve damage is not notably repaired, subject's bones are mending at an astounding rate. Note: Subjects experienced discomfort in the hips and joints. Examination found bones slightly shifted. Follow-up pending.

Subject called in distress. Simple visual examination showed an extremely altered stance and posture. X-rays showed noticeably changed skeletal structure. However, no scans indicated error from the nanites. Doctors told subject that nanites have been reloaded, which he believed. Incidents of this nature did not occur with this version of nanites among rat subjects, and these results should not be considered representative. Current explanations regard either an error simultaneously in both directives and self-analysis. Or that the subject's own self-perception has influenced the machines. Experimentation pending.

Subject retrieved with physical alterations at a far greater extent, cursory appearance no longer immediately recognizable as human. Mental facilities appeared to be intact, though obviously distressed. However, this proved difficult to gauge, given his difficulties speaking. Scans showed the nanites without error. Psychological exams confirmed our suspicions that the subject's mental disorders distorted the directive sent to the machines. Subject can no longer be released due to the severity of the alterations, including:

A coffee stain concealed most of the following details. On limited time, she cared not to peer through the dried liquid, worried what might befall Argos. What followed was instead a letter from their supervisors.

Subject, formerly Anthony Greene, has been retrieved for further study. After several more weeks, changes ceased, and nanites were expelled as expected. Though alive, subject is

unrecognizable and deemed nonfunctional. Subject is contained indefinitely for further study.

Due to the advanced nature of the malformations, the subject was determined no longer to be human. Because of this, their record need not be recorded with other subjects. However, in further studies, be sure to thoroughly vet subjects for psychological issues before treatment is applied.

Cursing internally, Penelope pushed aside the sheet and started over the others. Though she expected to find secrets, lies like monstrous transformations were beyond her imagination. Fur bristling with fear, she wondered what form awaited Argos; or more worryingly, what within him was causing these changes.

She could think about these implications later. First, her stomach sank as memories called in her mind. The previous night, in a panic, Argos called the doctor, they knew of his current state. Using her entire body, she pushed aside the file and looked over the next. The third subject healed successfully. Below that, Argos Brewer.

At first, the file only recounted things she knew. However, the newly printed paper included a recent update.

A distressed call from the subject confirms our fears. Descriptions of physical mutations are unlike those experienced by Subject Two, but not out of line for our theories on the matter. I recommend amending the psychological test after examination of the subject is complete. We have sent for the subject's acquisition; they will likely reach the main site shortly.

Lingering on the last section, she could hardly turn away. Worriedly, she shifted on her paws, tail twitching like a whip about to be snapped. They were coming for Argos, all while she occupied a rat, miles away. Planning could come later. First, she needed to get back.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! 014 Disengage Harmonia 144, she shouted in her mind. Yet, she experienced no sudden whirl, still saw the stark white light of the lab through rodent's eyes. *014 Disengage Harmonia 144!* She shouted, eyes closed and mind so focused she could almost hear the sound. Nothing changed, her claws still scraping against the polished desk. *014 Disengage Harmonia 144! 014 Disengage Harmonia 144!*

No, no! Not now! Something was wrong with her body, something preventing her from transporting. Heart racing and stomach sinking, she felt trapped in her form, the alien fur and body shape like bindings on her very soul. Panic and focus so occupied her, a sudden touch made her chest hurt with shock.

Eyes opened, and she squealed with terror, looking up to see a human grabbing her. A hand held her despite her writhing, a second finger running over the node on her head. The touch felt like static electricity in her brain, freezing her with absolute terror as she saw the doctor looking her over, bemused.

“Well now, seems our little rat has returned. What are we going to do with you?”