

Working Like a Dog: The Escape

—Returning to her body felt like splashing into frigid arctic waters, blinded by brilliant white light. Penelope gasped and flailed, searching around in temporary bewilderment. Kurtis put a gentle but firm arm around her, holding her until her breathing eased, and she grew calm. Her eyes adjusted to the light slowly, and she blinked until the hospital room came into focus. The world returned to color, and her gaze lingered on Kurtis's face. After recovering from his own daze, Yin pushed his head comfortingly underneath her hand.

"Is this real?" she asked, her voice raspy from disuse and dryness.

"Welcome back, Penelope," Kurtis said, running a finger across her cheek.

The sensation almost alien to her, she brought her hand up, covering her mouth with surprise as she moved her real hands. After so long, it was her voice, her body. Bringing her hands up further, she covered her face, tears escaping in a mixture of joy and residual fear. She cried in confusion, her body somehow utterly foreign and entirely natural. It was like when she was a child returning to her unlit home after a long vacation, but multiplied to an uncountable degree. Mostly, she was just relieved that the nightmare was over.

"You've been locked out for a while? Went through a lot, haven't you?" Kurtis asked, cautious but happy at her reaction.

Unable to speak, she nodded, sobbing openly into her hands. As Kurtis raised a comforting hand, she grabbed and gripped it. She held it close, her grip so tight that he winced in pain. He clenched his teeth and endured it, knowing that his presence helped her. It took a minute, but the

shock of returning to her body faded. “I didn’t think this would happen... I fought so hard for this, but it hardly feels real,” she murmured, searching the room as if the walls might be stripped down and shown to be another trick in the lab.

“You’re here now. But we’re not out of the woods yet,” he said, an eye to the door.

“Of all the steps we take, this’ll be the easiest,” she assured, rising to a seat. She felt achy and slow, her joints stiff as if she had just woken up from a week-long nap. “I’m nothing but a Jane Doe knocked out in an accident. Now that I’m better, checking out won’t be a problem.”

“I admire your optimism,” he said, his lack of faith obvious as she hung her feet over the side of the bed. “Be careful,” he warned, noticing a slight shiver as she held herself up.

Pulling the tubes and needles from herself hardly hurt anymore. “I need to walk on my own two feet,” he said forcefully. For all her confidence, her knees gave out as she stood, weak from disuse. Face red, more pained by embarrassment than the fall itself; she collapsed into a small heap. Kurtis put a hand on her shoulder to help her up, but she swatted it away. “Don’t! I can stand on my own feet,” she hissed, shaking as she pulled herself up, supported by the stand beside her bed. Her lips pulled back, and her teeth showed, like a bestial challenge to her weakness, and anyone who might try to help.

Though Penelope brought herself to stand, she could only lean against the wall, sweating from the exertion. Kurtis wanted to allow her to retain her pride but saw it would take far too long to leave, especially while drawing questions from everyone in the hospital. He crouched down and helped her stand.

“Kurtis, there’s more at play here than a harmonia accident. People are searching for me who’ll find out if the hospital releases us normally,” she warned, accepting his help.

“If we don’t want them logging us, we have to scare them,” Kurtis said, the corner of his mouth rising into a smile. “You were stranded out of your body because one of those idiots took the return gear off you. Even glancing at the user manual will show that it was their fault; you could sue this place into the dirt. Once we make that clear, they’ll be happy to get rid of us.”

“Perfect,” she agreed, finding her footing and summoning the strength to stand independently. In truth, she would rather put the ordeal behind her, not drag it through the courts. Even if she could not forget it, she knew it would drive her to more personal and targeted revenge.

Standing close to catcher her if she fell, Kurtis watched her with a mixture of worry and suspicion. “Penelope, if this is where you’ve been... Where is Argos?”

“Like I said, there’s more at play here than a harmonia accident. This rabbit hole goes so deep that I still haven’t hit the bottom.”

—No matter how bad Argos’s situation or transformation became, there was but a single memory that truly terrified him. He could hardly confront the moment, as it resided in the dark of a dream, foggy and subconscious.

In a sleep fitful from the constant aches and pops coming from his mutating body, he found the world of his dream taking shape. In the grassy fields where they trained puppies into security dogs, he led Artemis, his drug dog, through a set of traffic cones. Underneath one was a miniscule trace of contraband, but the hound found it nonetheless. Barking and pulling against her collar, she tipped over the cone to reveal the parcel.

Before Argos could even reward her, she turned and jumped on him, excitement overwhelming her training. “Down, girl. Down,” he commanded, chuckling slightly while rubbing the sides of her face. His words could not halt the puppy-like dog, but she stepped back as he raised her favorite toy, a short length of knotted purple rope. Barking, she wagged her tail and jumped before him until he threw it. As it sailed through the air, his consciousness fled him. Instead occupying the perspective of Artemis.

She bound for the toy before it even hit the ground. Joyful electricity seemed to coarse through her every muscle. When she completed his tasks, he always became so happy and proud of her. She liked seeing that expression of his, almost as much as when he would pet and congratulate her. Wagging her tail, she grabbed the toy between her jaws and shook it. She vowed, as much as a dog could, to continue to make him proud and happy like that.

Yet, as she picked up the toy, the world around her had changed in a blink. Cold tiles beneath her paws, florescent light buzzing above. She was back at the station, joined by a strange, rhythmic dripping. Glancing down, she saw ruby droplets spread out beneath her. Blood poured from a deep cut in her chest, the pain returning all at once, making her collapse and curl up in agony.

Cold daggers shot through her blood. The edges of her vision darkened and fear tightened around her heart. She didn’t want to die, and struggled. But she still felt the end creeping up behind her. Even slight movement left her exhausted, panting and choking as blood filled her lungs.

Darkness coalesced like tendrils around her, flooding her vision until she stood alone in the inky black. For a while, she remained in that nothingness, caught in a limbo. Fatigue dragged against her, and she wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and sleep. In the dark, she could

not tell if they were open or closed, and something kept her from drifting away. Exhausted and unable to sleep, she waited in the void for what seemed a lifetime.

From the blackness emerged white shapes, taking form into recognizable shapes. She saw herself, but as Argos, not Artemis. The line between them was difficult to define, especially as Argos's twisted and took a form between them. She looked down at the body, feeling somehow separate. The room took shape into the cell he wallowed in throughout the previous days, Argos fitful and turning over in his sleep.

Another shape formed in the room, a hound with fur so black that it seemed constructed from the darkness itself. Sharp, inky fangs showed in a malicious smile, the beast taking careful steps towards the sleeping figure. Argos stopped turning over as the hound reached him, its chin rested upon his chest, snout and fangs almost touching his face. Instead, he lay shivering with shallow breaths, as if sensing the presence and terrified by it. The creature jumped onto the bed, jaws open above his face, ready to bite, black droplets falling onto his cheeks.

Though separate from his sleeping body, Argos understood why it was so afraid and what the hound wanted from him. The black dog was Artemis, or at least an aspect of her. It remembered the pain and fear of death; a death met when she had no control over her own body, a death he caused. Her rage was obvious. She served him dutifully, worked tirelessly every day to please him, and he still robbed her of everything. It wasn't fair. Even if her first body was gone, she could still reap her reward, this time taking what was his.

The hound lay down atop him, dark eyes meeting his as the border between them blurred. He could feel her creeping in through the dark corners of her brain. The shadows surrounding the beast faded, revealing her true form once more. Perhaps she was corrupting his perception, but he

did not think so. His fear made him see her as a monster, but she was just as scared as he, her influence possibly unintentional.

Regardless of intention, they felt the distinction between them thinning. Looking back, they could no longer remember in training if they were the human or the hound. What scared him most was not the fading of their self, but that he did not entirely dislike it. He had little to return to. His humanity tenuous, he wondered how valuable it truly was. This feeling lasted only a moment, but that surrender haunted him in the days to follow.

When he woke, he brought his hands to his face. Though his hands were more paws than anything else, and his jaw twisting into a muzzle, some parts remained human. He felt those sections and clung to what remained, suppressing anything which seemed not of his own mind.

—Leaving the hospital proved easier than expected. Once they showed the harmonia gear and explained it as the problem, the hospital raised little fuss in letting her go. Even so, Penelope kept glancing over her shoulder, expecting to find someone following them. Not until they reached her apartment and locked the door twice over did she gain any sense of security. A feeling lessened by the bullet holes and signs of destruction still apparent throughout her home.

She found a seat and explained the situation. It took some time, and showed her just how little she understood. Argos was in danger, the nanite which healed him gone haywire. Though she only saw him for a moment, the mutations they caused were taking his humanity. Kept in a secret facility, she knew not what was befalling him, only that the doctor behind it all was cruel enough that nothing was beyond possibility. She was not about to give up on him, but could hardly drag others into the dangers ahead of them. But such a rescue would require a plan.

“I’ll help. Argos is a friend; I’m not leaving him to that psycho,” Kurtis said, still staring in disbelief, but trusting Penelope. “Though... I don’t know what use a fat security guard will be.”

“You’ll be more help than you realize,” Penelope assured, patting his shoulder. She fell to a seat, weary after so much standing and walking.

“So, what’s your plan? I doubt we can walk right into a lab like that.”

“We’ll have to be smart. I don’t know that place and don’t know where they’re keeping him. My plan is to gather enough information for it to be more important to keep us happy than to keep Argos. They won’t like it, but after a few threats, it’ll be easier to let us disappear than to hunt us.”

“Sounds simple enough, but step one is still to collect that information. Step one is the problem,” Kurtis objected, taking a seat across from her. “Infiltrating a place like will take more than the two of us in cheap disguises. Do we have anyone on the inside?”

“No...” she sighed, mind racing yet coming up with nothing to amend their hopeless situation. “I don’t have anyone else at all. Shit,” she murmured, more to herself. A small team would be best suited for a task like this, but two was less than she hoped for. “Argos wasn’t the social type; wasn’t close with his family. His only real friends are already here. I can’t think of anyone else trustworthy and competent.”

“Would you settle for just trustworthy?”

“Any port in a storm.”

“Maybe, but how big of a storm are we expecting?”

“I don’t know yet. But I know it’ll be a day or two before we can go; they’ll notice if I try sneaking in when I can hardly walk,” Penelope said, Kurtis searching through his phone for their aid. “Out of curiosity, who is this trustworthy person who wants to help us?”

Chuckling, Kurtis scratched the back of his head hesitantly. “Well... Giovanni,” he said, immediately getting an exasperated, questioning look from her. “Look, I didn’t say we were getting the best and brightest, but that kid is loyal to a fault. He’ll help us if he thinks it’s right, and anyone willing aid us is worth it, right?”

“Just make sure the boy knows what he’s getting himself into. I’ll not have anyone’s blood on my hands,” she agreed. Unfortunately, she was too desperate to turn down help, though she wished someone more qualified would arrive —some clue or plan, anything to keep them from stumbling around in the proverbial dark.

“Do any of us really know what we’re getting into?”

—For a time, Argos did not believe his eyes. On the other side of the one-way glass was what he could only describe as an angel. Though it had no earthly means of sensing him, it stared into the mirrored glass like it could see him there. Unnerved by the intensity in its golden eyes, he stepped aside, relieved to find that it did not follow him.

He shook his head and blinked, almost expecting the being to vanish; no more than a dream or a vision. However, it remained stoic and undaunting. Human in form, but slightly taller than average. Its skin looked like polished marble, white and solid like a statue. Golden sclera and bronze irises enhanced its already intense gaze, seemingly inhuman, but not bestial either. That

same gold, metallic luster shone from its hair and feathers. Most evident on the being was a pair of large, feathery wings which seemed to sway slightly in a non-existent breeze.

Though it looked strange, the true power of the being was obvious in its intangible aura and presence. It was something powerful, something dangerous. Even when not looking at him, it seemed to sense him, a fact that unnerved and scared him. His animal instinct warned against the being, making him wish to shrink back and hide, the fur on the back of his neck standing on end.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” came a voice behind him.

Argos wheeled around; fangs bared as he saw the doctor in the doorway. A low growl emerged from his throat, his claws flexing as he crouched low to attack. Empty threats; his half-mutated body was too weak and unbalanced to make any real attack.

The doctor recognized this, pulling a stun gun from his side. Electricity whined and lit atop the weapon. “No need to be so hasty, Mr. Brewer. You didn’t really believe you could sneak out of this facility all by yourself, did you?” he chuckled, smiling as Argos eased his attack, knowing that fighting would not be an option. Nodding in approval, the doctor closed the door behind him, trapping the two with only reinforced glass separating them from that creature.

His instincts on high alert, Argos noticed a hint of fear from the doctor. Some were directed towards the angel, but that was more respect. The doctor’s worry was directed instead towards the door behind him. With the commotion earlier, Argos knew something was going on out there. Not danger in the physical sense. Instead, he wanted all his experiments safe and locked in one room.

Remaining was the doctor’s plan. Thus, Argos knew he could not follow it. Waiting out of the question, and unable to fight in his current state, he endeavored to delay until an opportunity

presented itself. Searching for any option, his paw-hand found a loose file on the desk. *Subject 2*, followed by a frequently updated list of changes and observations that he did not read.

“Though not at all what we intended, Frank here is living proof of what our nanites are capable of,” the doctor said, beaming with pride. The claim made Argos suspicious, the creature behind him on an entirely different level from himself. “They repair you based on what your brain thinks you should be. We didn’t know it when things began, but Frank here had some subtle, but severe religious delusions. He believes he’s the archangel Gabriel, so the little bots did the best they could to make him so. When yours began, we wondered if you would follow a similar path to his. Comparatively, yours are a great deal more mundane, if less enjoyable for you.”

“So, that’s actually an angel?” Argos asked in disbelief, hardly able to speak with a canine muzzle. “That’s *in ’ossidle*.”

“In a sense,” the doctor scoffed, stepping forward and tapping on the glass. The being twitched at the sound, but remained stoic and focused. “More of a madman who fully snapped. The treatment can make him stronger, can give him organic wings. It cannot give him a flaming sword or begin the rapture.” Glancing at the sheet, Argos also noticed another belief, joined by length warnings in bold. Frank/Gabriel believed an angel’s voice could ‘compel the wills of men,’ though the details of this lay hidden on the other side of the sheet.

“And I turn into a dog,” he muttered, his tail worriedly tucked between his legs.

The doctor smirked, occasionally glancing at his phone anxiously. “On the bright side, Frank is too dangerous to ever leave that cell. Once tamed, you’ll experience all the freedoms and luxuries afforded to a common house pet.”

“Lucky *ne*,” he said, drawing attention from his hand. Inside the file was a solid shape, a key card.

“Yours is a step towards truer understanding. Think of what we could do if we directed mutations like these; controlled them,” he said, totally distracted with his own plans, walking up beside him and putting a hand on the mirrored glass. “Or don’t... You needn’t appreciate your contributions. But you can have a comfortable life if you just stop struggling at every turn.”

What I want is my old life back, he thought to himself. Even a look at the furred paws that had replaced his hands made him contemplate how impossible it was. A worrying voice spoke to him in his mind. It used no words, but told him to obey, that loyalty would serve him best, that it was natural.

Shut up, Artemis! He shouted internally. The man standing before him was an enemy, someone deserving only the fang. His two minds could agree on that. “I will not *stend* my life in a *trison* like that,” he said gravely, pointing to the angel’s cell, then towards his own. “Say what you *‘ill*. Like I *‘ould* ever trust you.”

“Don’t trust me then; trust my interests. I don’t want to keep you in an expensive cell if I don’t have to. Soon you won’t be able to tell our secrets, and you aren’t dangerous like Gabriel here,” he said.

The corner of Argos’s mouth twisting into a smile. He would not die in this lab, nor as a lapdog to that arrogant beast. Escape was worth any risk. “Dangerous? Don’t *underestinate* the bite of a cornered dog,” Argos hissed. His warning made the doctor step back, gripping his weapon defensively. Exactly what he wanted the man to do. “You focused on the wrong subject,” he said, swiping the stolen key card through the door beside him.

“Don’t!” the doctor shouted, jumping to stop him.

It was too late. Striking the door, Argos threw open the angel’s cell, the being immediately turning towards the exit. Cursing, the doctor lunged for the door, grabbing it to slam it shut. Argos fell backwards, a sudden pop in his spine making a bipedal stance impossible. Just before the doorway could close, an ivory-skinned hand stopped it. Muttering desperately, the doctor pulled to shut the door, face red and sweating as he struggled, but to no avail.

The angel barely seemed to register the action, effortlessly throwing open the door. Swinging its arm, it flung the heavy steel with such force that the handle bent and its hinges rattled. Both on the ground, the doctor and Argos looked on in terrified silence as the angel stepped free from its confinement, appraisal gaze shifting over the both.

—Two days to recover and Penelope felt her strength return in full force. Her body felt natural again, and she was ready to take on whatever the lab might hold. Giovanni came over, as meek as ever, but willing to help. She did not know if his presence inspired confidence or eroded it. “I don’t want any of you to have illusions or think that this will be a fun spy mission. These are bad people, and we’re only looking to collect as much information as possible. We avoid danger, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be risky. No one will blame you if you leave now.”

“We know the risks. Argos is a friend. Besides, we’re security; even if this is off the record, it’s almost a duty,” Kurtis assured.

Giovanni nodded in agreement but noticed the lack of faith the other two had in him. “I know how to use the gear now. And by our nature, it is the coward who is capable of the greatest courage,” he spoke with enough confidence to reassure them. Though he wondered how useful he

would be, he resolved that he would see it through to the end. “Of course, we need a plan. You’re the only one who’s been there, Penelope. How do we get in?”

With a sigh, Penelope looked at her hands. Her only experience in the facility was spent trapped in the body of a rat; her cage covered throughout it. All other information she gathered over the previous days in what little investigation she could manage. “Getting into the building will be easier. There’s a smoker’s door on the north side we can use. It isn’t far from some lockers where I could take a key card and wardrobe.”

“Infiltrate in a lab coat?” Kurtis started. “Between us, don’t we have enough sets of harmonia gear to sneak in as rats or someth—”

“No! We don’t go in as rats!” Penelope snapped, a shiver running through her hands. After the moment, she saw the two men staring at her with surprise and confusion. She caught herself, realizing her outburst. “I tried something like that already, they know about the gear and will be ready for that,” she said, unwilling to detail her exact experiences. Until her death, she intended never to occupy another rat, mouse, or anything like them.

“They might notice three strangers snooping around in ill-fitting coats,” Giovanni objected.

“We’re not all going in; we need to be quicker and quieter than that. I’m the only one who goes in human. Kurtis, you’ll be lookout and driver; park nearby and keep watch, warn us if they start getting suspicious. Gio, you’ve got experience using the gear; use a mouse to sneak around and go where I can’t. We all stay in contact with radios and get out if anything goes wrong.”

“Something always goes wrong,” Kurtis muttered, hands on the sides of his head as he cast his gaze upward. “Do you even know if Argos is still alive?”

“I don’t know anything for sure... But he’s still alive,” she said, her certainty apparent. “We’ve got a getaway driver, and I’m the only one going in. They don’t take any more of us.”

“I assume we’ll want to do this during the day, blend into the crowd. Cameras don’t sleep,” Kurtis suggested, peeking out the window at the rising sun.

“We all know the plan, let’s leave now and be back as soon as we can,” she said, glancing down at her clothes, clean and professional attire, not unlike those she saw the staff wearing.

“What about when this is over?” Kurtis asked, clearly anxious and worried; though only a madman wouldn’t be. “After we take their test subject and threaten their shady-ass organization, I doubt they’ll just shake their fists at us ‘meddlesome scamps’ and let bygones be bygones.”

“None of you are going into the building. Unless God himself gives up names, they’ll never know you guys were involved. As for myself, I intend to collect enough info that it won’t be worth it. Even if they’re especially vengeful, I’m still leaving for the new job in a week, gonna be on the other side of the country soon enough.”

“I suppose that’s everything, then. Let’s commit some espionage.”

—Argos needed no more warning to flee. Before the angel could make its next move, he bolted out the door and down the hall. No longer able to walk on two legs, but not changed enough to run on three, he had a shambling, loping stride on all fours that was not quite human or animal. His dash took him to down a long hall and to a heavy steel door. He slammed into it and pulled desperately at the handle. Magnetically sealed, it did not even shake as he silently begged and beat at it. For all his strain and struggle, he could not flee; footsteps following swiftly behind him.

Wheeling around on his feet, he saw the doctor running his way with equal fear and panic. His coat falling behind him, the doctor sprinted for the door, his pace so fast and uncontrolled that he slammed into the barrier shoulder-first. “Are you suicidal, or just fucking stupid,” the doctor hissed, seeing Argos cowering in the corner. He pulled at the door but received no better a result, casting frightened glances towards the hall they ran down. “That thing will not spare you out of compassion or anything like that. He’s psychotic, believes he’s here to begin the fucking apocalypse!”

“Key card!” Argos shouted, looking back towards the fallen coat and knowing their survival intertwined. The doctor turned and started running towards it, but the angel turned down the hall before reaching it. He jumped to the side, paralyzed with fear. The angel strode onwards with wings outstretched, eyes forward as though it had not even noticed them. It reached the door and put a hand on the knob.

Argos expected it to only rattle the door like they; he underestimated it. With a motion as relaxed and nonchalant as if it was not there, the angel tore the door from its hinges. He flinched and sprung back, steel bent and crumpled, thrown behind him like litter. Any illusions of safety vanished from his mind. A creature like that could kill him without realizing it, betting his escape on it a foolish decision.

In the air that followed the angel, Argos recognized a strange scent. So subtle that his powerful nose could barely detect it, there lay a sweet, nostalgic smell. Though he could not remember such an odor, there was something unmistakably human to it; even if he could not explain how. *A voice that could compel the wills of men.* He recognized the curious scent. Nanites could not grant the creature the voice of God, but they could create pheromones with similar

results. Perhaps saving him, he felt no effects from the aura, his changes taking enough humanity that he no longer suffered that weakness.

The same could not be said for the doctor, whose eyes had become unfocused as he drifted into a trance. Argos recognized his opportunity to flee but dared not tread close to the angel. Right now, he intended to stay far from it, but follow behind as it made its way out. But the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. The angel disappeared down the hall, but before he could follow, the doctor woke from his state.

All the man's poise and professionalism drained away, and he pounced upon Argos, stunned gun buzzing with electricity. Spitefully, he drove it into the meeting point between Argos's neck and chin. As Argos lay rigid and whining in pain as they stood, holding him by the collar. "Hope you enjoyed your little breakout. I'm going to go collect my research, you are going back your cell until you can't so much as think about escape!" he snarled, dragging the smaller Argos back the way they came.

His racing heart providing clarity and speed, all spurred on by pain-infused rage. Before the current's ache and stiffness had left Argos's muscles, he lunged forward with jaws wide open. Gleaming fangs closed around the doctor's wrist, the rich flavor of blood flooding his mouth. Yelping, the man dropped his weapon onto the ground, pulling back, but unable to free his arm. Fire filled his eyes, and bloodlust stirred in his heart. He could kill the man there, lose himself to feral instinct and boiling blood, bite with savage strength until he finally ceased to breathe.

More than anything else, his instincts wanted him to attack, threw tinder onto the flames of his anger. Perhaps because it called to him, he pulled back. In his mind, preserving what little humanity he could cling to. With a snarl and a wolfish smile, he delivered a strong headbutt to the

bridge of the doctor's nose. The sharp pain of the impact was dwarfed by the catharsis of seeing the man fall bloody and unconscious to the floor.

Though he could not stand on his own feet anymore, he felt a new sense of freedom and stability. He started down the halls after the other mutated creature. Somehow, he believed its path of destruction would lead him to the open skies of the outside.

—“If anything goes wrong, get out immediately. Don't worry about me,” Penelope commanded. In response, Gio squeaked and nodded his tiny head. A palpable tension filled the car, all three nervously staring at the pristine building. The plan only moments from beginning.

Parked across from the facility, their escape vehicle was ready, but off so as not to draw attention. Kurtis sat with sweaty palms on the wheel, anxious fiddling with his tools betraying the calm mask he wore. Gio's body lay empty in the back seat, harmonica gear lit and beeping. Instead, he occupied a small white rat in Penelope's pocket. He was equipped with a tiny camera to collect evidence and a radio receiver with speakers tuned to a frequency so high that only rodents could hear it. The three devices were small enough to be hidden at a glance, costing them quite a bit. Finally, Penelope wore street clothes that allowed freedom of movement for running and fighting. She wanted to bring a gun but settled instead for a folding knife hidden behind her waistband.

“We could spend all day going over plans, again and again, making sure we're ready. This only gets done if we actually go,” she said, opening the door but unable to take the first step out. “Kurtis, stay with us and start calling if anything looks suspicious,” she said, tapping the earpiece hidden beneath her hair. “We're in and out, find their secrets and disappear before they know anything's wrong... Gio—”

“We can sit here discussing the plan all day, but it doesn’t start until you take that step,” Kurtis said, forcing a smile as he tried to joke.

With a sigh, she stepped outside into the sunlight. “God help me,” she murmured, looking at the imposing stone building; a spotless grey monstrosity like a futuristic castle.

“Just come back,” Kurtis said, grabbing her arm and stopping her.

“I’m getting him back,” she stated simply.

“I want Argos saved too, Penelope. But if what you said is true... we may never—”

“Don’t say it.”

“We won’t get things back the way they were. He doesn’t come back healed and human. He’s my best friend, but us joining him doesn’t make things any better for us,” Kurtis warned, his face deathly serious as the gravity and reality of their situation set in.

“I will not be kept by them again. Even if I have to burn this place to the ground, I’ll find what I need,” she said, shaking off his hand. Gio squirmed nervously in her coat pocket, calming as she put a hand over him. “Let’s go,” she said, striding confidently towards the side entrance. Earlier, she had pretended to be a passerby, borrowing a cigarette and secretly placing a square of duct tape over the lock. Holding herself calmly proved difficult with how nervous she was, a relaxed and mundane mask the hardest to wear.

The act seemed unnecessary; the smoker entrance without any others. She slipped in and darted towards the lockers. Subtlety would be pointless here in her street clothes. She relied on the area being empty and the cameras unmonitored. It seemed to pay off, as she entered the storage space without seeing a soul, no alarms blaring as she reached the lockers. Using a small set of bolt

cutters, she opened several, taking a lab coat and several key cards, not knowing which would grant her the most access.

“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,” she muttered to herself, examining a key card and starting towards the lower levels. Gio squeaked in response, allowing her to pick him up and place him into the white pocket. He stood on his hind legs and peeked out, nose twitching as he waited.

Security proved minimal, their card granting them access to a stairwell and the lower floors. They encountered a researcher on their way down; she held her breath as he passed, glancing up and breathing with relief as he walked past so urgently that he seemed not to notice her. As they continued down several flights and twice as many doors, she realized an issue in their plan. Much of this building was a normal manufacturing plant and research lab. Finding secrets would be like looking for a beige needle in a haystack.

On one of the lower floors, Gio began to stir, squeaking quietly to signal her. She paused, watching as he poked his head from her pocket, nose twitching as he caught a scent. “What is it?” she asked, receiving an annoyed look from the rat, unable to speak. “If it’s our only clue,” she said, swiping her card and unlocking the door.

Bright fluorescent lights stung their eyes as they entered. They froze upon seeing several others in that hall. It seemed a processing and storage area of sorts, rows of bins containing everything from samples, extra equipment, and locked iron boxes labeled as classified. On the far side of the room was a large chute marked with red warning signs, an incinerator. The sight made her shiver, despite knowing it a common device in such facilities. Sitting around or leaning against the shelves were several workers and nurses working disinterestedly as they logged or moved supplies.

“You smelled something; find it,” Penelope whispered to Gio, lowering him to the ground. He scampered off to the shelves, while she picked up the log and pretended to work.

Gio climbed the shelves until he reached a plastic bin of used clothes. The little rat pointed his snout towards the box and squeaked, nodding as she met eyes with him. After searching around for anyone who might be watching, she popped open the box. A hospital gown, clearly used; strangely, black hairs dotted the sweaty clothes, longer and straighter than normal body hair.

She held up one of the strands of fur, images of the dog-like creature from the lab flashing in her memory. Without such memories, Gio cocked his head in confusion, rubbing his nose as he questioned the scent that led him.

“Is that fur?” asked a voice beside Penelope. After remaining unnoticed for so long, the sudden interaction almost made her jump from her skin. She recovered just as quickly, hiding her shock and fear as she mustered a smile. Beside her stood a lab assistant, a woman younger than herself. The woman’s eyes passed up and down; she clearly wondered who Penelope was, but the lab was large enough that a new face was not uncommon.

“I think,” Penelope said, feigning ignorance. She glanced nervously towards Gio, who had thankfully hidden among the boxes.

“That’s from the B7 or 8,” the woman muttered, checking the top of the box. “Best leave that. No one gets whatever weird shit goes on down there.” Nodding, Penelope looked back towards the stairs, now with a location to search. “Where do you work anyway?” the woman asked. The others all wore laminates around their necks, something Penelope lacked.

“Fourth,” Penelope responded, hoping her reply made sense. Distracting the woman with talk, she placed her arm near where Gio hid and waiting until he crawled into her sleeve.

“Fourth? What does someone like you do on—”

“Thank you,” Penelope interjected, stopping the conversation as she felt the rat hurry past her wrist. Though the lab assistant was confused and caught off-guard, Penelope started walking swiftly back towards the stairs. The abrupt exit might raise questions, but not as many as if she were to bumble cluelessly through a conversation.

Looking over her shoulder revealed that the woman had gone back to her job. If she suspected anything, it was overshadowed by her desire to simply work and not raise trouble. She opened the door and hurried down the stairs, forgetting the need for subtlety as she raced through the empty stairwell. “Had an encounter. Keep your eyes open for anything... anything suspicious,” she said into her earpiece.

For a moment, waiting for a response, she thought the signal might be blocked. Her worries were assuaged as a voice sounded in her ear. “Nothing up top,” Kurtis replied, clear as ever.

Two floors down, and she reached the seventh basement floor, halls of offices and personnel rooms. “Dammit,” she whispered, seeing cameras in the ceiling and men in their offices. Though not an area she could search, Gio emerged from her sleeve and chittered at the door. “I can’t follow you, Gio. You want to split up?” The rat nodded, and she opened the door a crack. “Be careful,” she said, before letting him through. She lingered long enough to see the camera-equipped rat squeeze under the door of an empty office.

“Security guard just showed up. He’s standing around outside, doesn’t seem to be on-guard,” Kurtis said through the earpiece.

“Thanks. Gio and I have split up; I may need you to relay messages,” she replied, hearing a quick agreement through the device. She moved slowly as she reached the eighth floor,

tentatively clicking the door open with her card. It opened, but she heard a worrying whine as the lock logged her entry.

The halls of this floor looked different from the rest. Metal corridors with heavy doors on the sides, the hum of machinery absent from the thick walls and ceilings. It seemed more like the deck of a spacecraft than a lab; the tight, maze-like halls claustrophobic and unnerving in their similarity. Everything was locked, and she worried using her card would only set off alarms if it failed to open it. Worse, she knew this an area she could not get caught in, so obviously an outside.

Finally, she spotted an open door along the hallway, left slightly ajar. Before anyone might catch her, she darted inside. Producing her camera, she filmed the dark room, an observation room with a window of mirrored glass, and a desk with an active monitor. Beyond the window was an exercise room, a treadmill, several lifting stations, and a water cooler. However, a glance at the screen showed that each was meant to test subjects. She skimmed the notes; detailing degeneration of subject E-4's physical capabilities as his limbs reshaped.

She moved on from the room in search of more evidence. Nearing a corner at the meeting point between two halls, she froze, hearing voices beyond. Panicked muttering between two men, an argument, but too distant to make out the exact words. Cursing internally, she wondered if it were time to flee, the only open room already explored, and the bath before her occupied. *No!* She came here with a singular purpose, and would not leave until she achieved it.

If she were to clear the hallway or sneak past, she would need a plan. Hiding in the observation room would do her no good, a sitting duck waiting to be caught, with no assurance that the two would clear from her path. Feigning innocence and attempting to walk past as another

employee was too risky, a single question blowing her cover. If she were to continue her search, she would need some kind of distraction.

Perhaps in answer to her need, perhaps a terrible incident to damn her, such a distraction came. “There’s something wrong! Get out of there, Penelope!” Kurtis shouted into her ear. The sound came in fuzzy and quiet. Eyes widening, she realized what was happening. Only minutes before he came through clear as day, but their signal was suddenly fading, likely disrupted by outside interference. They knew she was here.

She turned and ran back the way she came, heart sinking as the doors locked automatically around her. *Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!* Red lights flashed from sparse ceiling lights, her heart pounding as she searched for an escape. Reaching the end of the hallway, she almost fell to her knees, the stairwell door shut and sealed. Instead, she steeled herself. They had not yet located her, and she had escaped this place before. She could do it again. She would do it again.

“Kurtis, what the hell is happening up there?” she hissed into her earpiece.

~~“Cutting the signal — They’ve found us! — Penelope, where are you?”~~ came through the line, the machines straining to communicate. He was noticed, but still waiting for her. She held down a button along the device’s side, forcing it to scroll through channels for a free one. ~~“Penelope! Where are you!?”~~ he shouted again, their pieces finding one another, if only for a moment. “Gio’s back, they picked up on his harmonia’s signal; tried to block him from getting back. I can’t wait here much longer.”

“Get out,” she commanded. This was her fault; she knew as much. After escaping the first time, they would not allow harmonia gear to pass through their halls undetected again. By bringing Gio, she had insulted them, all while damning her own team. But Kurtis and Gio were safe, and

like that, they would remain. If she could not escape with them, she would certainly not drag them down. This was her only way to protect them. “Leave me! I’ll escape on my own.”

“Penelope! What are you—” Kurtis started, a note of panic in his voice.

“We can’t just leave you here,” Gio said, his real voice coming through the speaker.

She smiled to hear the sound, knowing them safe. “You can’t save me, so save yourselves. I’ll find my way out of this.”

“You think we’re just going to—”

“Go!” she yelled, pulling out the earpiece and smashing it under her foot, killing any signal that could be followed. Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she let her previous plans go and allowed a moment of calm, despite the situation. Putting a hand on her knife, she looked around for a way to avoid the open. If she were to survive, she stealth and deception would be her savior. She was alone and in danger, but that did not mean she was beaten.

—For a while, Argos tried to walk back on two feet. Braced against a wall, he hobbled along, putting a pain in his spine. Progress was slow, stopping altogether as his arm slipped and he tumbled to the floor. Lying on the ground, he got a real look at his hands, though they could hardly be called that anymore. Black-furred, his wrists climbed up his arms and his hands compacted, black claws pointing from his fingers. They were no longer hands, but dog-like paws.

With a pained sigh, he accepted it. Even if he escaped, even if he returned home, he would never get back his old life. *Very well.* If his old life was over, his life itself was not. Letting go of those hopes, of his very humanity; it hurt, like tearing a large scab from his chest, or his very heart.

However, once finished, he felt a strange peace wash over him, a thousand pounds lifted from his shoulder.

He rose again to his feet, but not all the way. On all fours like an animal, he walked down the hall, the position proving more comfortable than a two-legged stance. It was still wrong; his shape more like a dog's skin stretched over a person. Moving was awkward and difficult with a form not quite animal or human.

Sirens blared above as the escape fell into full-swing. Following the angel was easy enough, its path of destruction less than subtle, all marked with the remnants of that strange scent that surrounded it. Another smell made him pause, sweat and fear, all from a human. Peeking around the corner, he found a scientist examining another crumpled door.

Dazed, the man spoke into his phone, describing the path that the angel was taking. Fortunately, they only seemed concerned with that creature, his own escape ignored beside it. They spoke with panic and desperation. They had no idea how to stop its advance, its reinforced cell door the only thing that ever kept it contained.

Animal instincts warned against the angel, a voice within him warning that it was dangerous, that even following its trail was foolish. Those who researched it clearly feared it just as much, keeping great distance and quivering as they spoke of its escape. Argos felt a shiver of fear run down his spine. That creature escaped because he released it, loosed it unto the world. It should have worried him, maybe even regret his choice. But instead, it excited him; he was taking back from them, even taking a piece out of the world above.

He and the researcher returned to the present at the same time. "You're—" the researcher began, turning to see him and stepping back.

“Yes. You can tell the others if you like; try to stop me if you feel brave,” Argos threatened, baring white fangs in warning. An empty threat, movements stiff and awkward, he could not hope to fight the man. However, the man was scared, not foolish enough to challenge the twisted, dog-like creature before him. The man stumbled back, raising his hands defensively as Argos passed. Once behind him, he heard the man frantically speaking into his phone. He did not fear that report. One way or another, he would never return to that cell.

Though the layout of the lab was still a mystery to him, he could feel himself getting closer to the exit. Breaking into a run, he rushed through the twisting halls and destroyed doors until he found a scent that gave him pause. He could have continued along the angel’s path but was drawn instead to a side office. Its door looked closed, but lay slightly ajar so as not to lock. Nose to the crack beneath the door, he sniffed until he recognized it.

He burst into the room, smiling and excited as she recognized the smell. Penelope jumped as he entered, dropping the files and putting a hand at her side. She wore a white lab coat and tied her hair into a tight ponytail, her body language communicating a desire to remain undetected. He could have jumped on her with excitement, overjoyed to see her safe, both seeking to rescue one another. However, she only looked at him with confusion and fear. Seeing that expression in her eyes, he stepped back and shrank away.

A slight whimper escaping him, he realized his mistake. He should have expected this. If he were no longer human, how would he be recognized for his old self? Even as his logical made came to terms with it, he still felt betrayed. The only person he could rely on did not recognize him, more so, she feared him, was disgusted by the creature before her. Ears flattened against his head; he backed towards the door. First, he was angry at her for not seeing him, then at himself for blaming her, then only a profound loss and sorrow for what he could never reclaim.

Her expression faded quickly. Something in his eyes sparked her memory. Though further changed, she knew this the dog-like creature which saved her before. “Argos,” she whispered, its ears rising. “Oh my god,” she murmured, stumbling a step back. She had prepared for the worst, even considered what would happen if he were dead, but so thoroughly mutated, she was not ready for this. Tears collecting in the corners of her eyes, pity and sadness, but also a deep regret. Had she trusted her instincts, had she seen the organization for what they were, she could have prevented everything. Or at least, she believed as much.

Partially to apologize, but instead, happy to see him again, she stepped forward and knelt to embrace him. Yet, Argos could not erase the memory of the face she made, her fear and disgust at him. As she approached, he backed away, unwilling to meet her gaze.

“Argos, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were—” she started.

“No... No, my old life is over,” Argos muttered, backing away towards the door.

“To hell with our old lives then. Fuck what we were and fuck this place. Let’s just burn it all to the ground and find a new world for ourselves,” she offered, pulling up her phone, its photos filled with classified information. “You don’t want to be alone,” she said, more a suggestion than a question. She reached out again to him with a compassionate hand.

This time, he allowed her to touch his cheek. He flinched at the contact but calmed as she persisted. Closing his eyes, he leaned into the warmth of her touch as she stroked his cheek. The gesture told that it was ok, that they were together in this. She moved closer, embracing him with her arms around his neck. Lowering his snout, he held her close, forgetting for a moment that they hid in the dark office of an ungodly laboratory.

But as they separated and opened their eyes, they remembered where they were. “Let’s burn this place to the ground,” Argos growled.

—Peering out the open door, Penelope searched halls for anyone. She motioned for Argos to follow. Keeping after the angel seemed their best strategy, for it alone could tear the heavy doors asunder. Even walking in the wake of its destruction, she could hardly believe what she had seen.

Hiding and shivering as she heard metal screeching. The door was torn from its hinges as though it weighed nothing. Through it stepped a humanoid creature. Though ‘human’ seemed an ill-fitting descriptor. Impossibly smooth pale skin, and wings of golden feathers, an image straight from an illuminated tome, and surrounded by an unearthly aura. Soon after came a sweet scent; faint, but present. She could not place the curious air, but it enraptured her, tickled the back of her mind as she tried to recall where she had smelled it before. By the time she collected her thoughts and woke from the trance, more time had passed faster than she thought, and the entity had left.

Pushing aside the memory, the two hurried down the dark hallways. Uncontested in their advance, she felt a growing recognition for the corridors, knowing them close to the exit. She allowed herself a moment of excitement, a feeling that they were finally free. But fate had other plans, seeming to slap her for even considering them safe. She turned a final corner, knowing the door to the stairwell just beyond, and expecting to find it ripped open like all the others. Instead, she saw the angel standing motionless in front of the door, merely staring at it.

Breath catching with surprise, Penelope skidded to a stop, Argos bumping into her as they almost toppled over one another. “What the hell is it doing?” she whispered in a hiss, Argos only shaking his head in confusion. Lips pulled back in nervous tension as she peered around the wall,

Argos whining behind her. That same sweet scent met her nose again. It caught her attention but did not entrance her like before, only leaving her slightly more careless.

“Why’d it stop?” Argos growled, fur bristling as he caught the creature’s scent, put off rather than subdued by its presence. “It didn’t *sto*’ at any other door!”

“I don’t know, but we don’t have time to wait around!” Penelope hissed back, glancing at the blinking emergency lights. “What the hell is that thing, anyway?”

“*Nutations*, like *ne*. His are a lot... *nore*,” Argos explained, ears pointed back and tail tucked between his legs. “That thing is dangerous; we shouldn’t ‘*e* so close.”

“You shouldn’t be here at all,” came a voice from the end of the hall behind them. Rounding the corner was the doctor, pistol held out before him. A vengeful scowl on his face, he seethed with rage but held his weapon steady. “Fucking thing told security to bow. Dumbasses are still on their knees in the halls. It seems I have to do everything myself,” he muttered, creeping closer, clearly beyond bluffing or empty threats.

“He’s not going back with you,” Penelope warned, placing herself between them.

“Who the fuck even are you, woman?” he asked, annoyed and confused. “You freed one of my subjects; I will not allow you to escape as well!” He was willing to shoot Argos there. The nanites within him would repair any wounds that did not kill Argos outright, freeing the doctor to shoot him in the spine or leg with only temporary repercussions. The man’s eyes eventually moved from Argos to Penelope. “Oh, I know who you are... You’re the spy that set off our alarms.”

Penelope saw a glint in the man’s eye, a twitch in his face that made her heart skip a beat. “Get down!” she shouted to Argos, ducking for cover as he dove behind the corner. Like thunder

and lightning, his gun went off, and the bullet clanged into the wall behind her. She pulled the knife free and flipped out its blade, for all the good the little weapon would do. Casting an uneasy glance beside her, she saw the angel looking her way, unmoving.

Argos sprinted towards the other side of the hall, shrinking down, though the doctor had his attention directed towards Penelope. Baring his fangs, he waited for him to draw closer and turn away long enough to get a good bite in. Pinned, Penelope waited, mind racing for an escape.

The doctor neared the corner, keeping a safe distance and his gun ready. His focus turned so greatly towards the intruder that Argos saw his opportunity. Dashing and leaping suddenly, the man turned, but not fast enough. Argos bit at the man's arm, catching only his sleeve. He pulled hard enough to throw his balance. Penelope seized the moment, jumping from her hiding spot and lunging. The doctor blocked the blow, knife sinking into his forearm.

He yelled out and pulled the trigger, bullets flying wildly through the hall. Yelling out, Penelope grabbed at her cheek and the side of her torso, blood flowing freely from flesh wounds. Riled into panic, Argos released the attacker and raced to her aid, pulling her back under cover. Grumbling, the doctor rose again to his feet, clutching his arm, but holding the weapon.

Penelope glanced around for anything, finding only the empty walls and drops of her blood. Argos stepped in front of her, standing protectively as the doctor turned the corner, smoking steel of the gun aimed for her face. She held Argos. After everything, dying here seemed a joke.

"Stop," a voice commanded, resounding and deep, like a horn echoing through an ancient canyon. Argos looked around, confused at the strange silence that followed. The doctor stood frozen; expression strained as his finger twitched, not quite able to pull the trigger. Immobilized as well, Penelope's eyes darted around fearfully, her body refusing to move.

The angel stepped close to the three. Argos's every instinct screamed that he flee, but he remained resolute by her side. The being stopped and stood over them, expression unreadable.

"Kneel, mortals," it commanded, voice stern and unearthly. Penelope obeyed without a second thought. She attributed the decision to fear, assuming she did so to appease the dangerous creature. She knelt before it. Unable or unwilling to move, she could not change her position or even turn her head. The doctor did the same, face dripping with sweat, even as he did the same. "Be not afraid," it continued, perhaps noticing their shivers of terror.

With that command alone, Penelope felt a strange wave of emotion sweep over her. In some sense, she knew that it influenced her. But her state of mind was not a concern to her at that moment. She smiled at her foolishness, fearing such a noble, regal being. She knew now that she obeyed it not out of fear, but deep, unabating respect and understanding for her place.

Eyes wide with terror, Argos could only watch as the two humans bowed without regard for former desires or wills. He could barely muster a low growl as the angel stepped closer, the being not even seeming to register his presence. The angel walked close to the two and lowered itself, placing a hand on both their heads. Despite the demandingness of the motion, both the doctor and Penelope smiled, honored to please the creature.

"Follow," the angel commanded as it started slowly away, both rising in tandem. Argos looked around for help, or a weapon, or anything. Some doors were cracked open, researchers looking fearfully at the angel. They knew no help would come, now wishing that it would leave.

Metal tore, and the angel ripped open the exit, warning bells ringing outside. To Argos's horror, Penelope followed, the angel bringing them away to places and for reasons unknown. Protective instinct igniting, his fur bristled and he charged forward. Blood boiling and snarls

escaping his throat, he bit down on the angel's leg. Jaws clamped around its ankle; he strained to pull the entity from the door, or at least wound it. To his dismay, he could not budge the limb an inch. He may as well have bitten into stone, his fangs aching and failing to pierce its skin.

"No!" he growled. Glancing up, he saw that he actually made the imposing creature pause and look down at him. He had only a moment to regret before it kicked him off. The wind burst from his lungs, and a jolt of pain shot through him. A sickening snap sounded through the air, and he sailed down the hall, skidding along the ground and coming to a sudden stop on the far wall.

Chest paralyzed, he quivered and struggled to draw breath. Broken ribs, his front right leg sprained, and his head throbbed and ears ringing from an impact. He attempted to stand, but his legs were like jelly and the room spinning. The angel started out the door and up the stairs, Penelope and the doctor following behind without a glance towards him.

"You're not leaving with her!" he shouted, taking a wide stance and slowly making his way towards the stairs. He would save her; if nothing else and no matter what the cost, he would do that. Lips peeled back to show white fangs and claws clicking on the ground, he paced towards the facility exit, no longer concerned with the prospect of his freedom. "Get *'ack* here," he hissed, stumbling out the door and staring up the stairs.

Fortunately, the angel's slow pace allowed him to catch up. Stopping that creature was impossible, but stopping an entranced woman was. Limping on his injured leg, he climbed as fast as he could, panting from the effort. He made his way behind them quickly, catching Penelope as she turned the inner corner of the stairs. Saving her relied on the angel not staying or concerning itself with her. It seemed beyond mortals like her, but its actions were so mysterious and detached that he could not hope to predict it.

Desperately, he grabbed her foot as she took a step. *Sorry*, he thought to himself, pulling back in the brief window. Caught off-balance, she fell to the ground, smacking her face onto the concrete, blood flowing from her nose as she lay stunned. He grabbed her as best she could with his legs and jaws, pulling her down and away from the creature. To his joy, the angel did not so much as flinch, the doctor remaining in lock-step behind it.

“No! I have to follow!” Penelope protested, shaking away the confusion and clawing at the ground. He would not allow this, placing himself atop her and biting down on her arm, doing everything to restrain and stop her.

He was weak and unable to keep her long, only aided by her momentary lack of coordination. Not wanting to hurt her, she quickly threw him off and started to climb again. But he would not allow this. He jumped and pounced, sending her to the ground and holding her arm so tightly in his jaws that it drew blood. If it broke her from her spell, she would forgive him.

But that clarity did not come easily. “I will follow!” she declared, resorting to punches and scratches to throw him. He remained resolute, accepting the pain and vowing to see her leave this place freely. Then a sharper pain shot through him.

A yelped whine leaving his clamped jaws, his eyes wide as he recognized the pain. Surprise certainly, betrayal as well. He knew her under the control of another, but somehow believed she would fight it or show a similar restraint to his own. Glancing back, she saw her knife stuck into his side, stopped by his ribs. His mind froze at this, both he and Artemis reeling at the memory of the blade that killed them.

“Wait...” he whispered, releasing her arm in shock. She did not relent, stabbing over and over into his chest and ribs. Shallow cuts, but the damage mounted, blood soaking his fur. “He

said follow; not fight,” he murmured, the flesh around the wound blazing hot, electricity shooting through his body, and a chill flooding through him. Then, a final strike jolted him like lightning. He barked a high pained sound, the knife finding its way between two ribs.

Too much to take, he fell over, muscles liquid. Blood seeped from his wound and pooled around him, his every breath seeming to rip his wounds further. Penelope stood, distraught and glancing between him and the stairs above. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, pulling the blade away and putting pressure on the wound. She shook as she looked down at the nasty gash, shivering with guilt and horror. “Why did you make me!?” she sobbed, speaking to no one in particular. “Argos... Argos I didn’t want to. I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Don’t go,” Argos whispered, lightheaded and finding the pain numbing, a sensation that only frightened him further. To his surprise and disgust, she turned away, looking to follow the being. However, she did more than that. She knelt and picked up Argos, causing him to whine in pain. Carrying the oversized half-dog creature awkwardly, she walked up the stairs. Her pace deliberately sluggish. “What are you doing?” he asked between grunts of pain.

“Following... It didn’t say how,” she answered, speaking through her teeth from the strain. The exertion came not only from carrying the heavy body, but the concentration required to think on anything but the command given.

Climbing the steps was slow and painful, but she dared not stop or look back. Sirens blared around her and commotion sounded from the facility, her muscles screamed for rest, and curiosity bade she turn and see the chaos that she wrought. But she did not. Like Orpheus rising from Hades, she feared that the slightest hesitation would cause the ground to collapse beneath them, the labs swallowing them, never to escape.

She thought the dark stairs would never end. By the time she reached the exit, the bright sunlight briefly blinded her. Sounds of wind and birds and the outside reached her, music more beautiful than any other she had ever heard. She could have cried, were she not so preoccupied with saving Argos. As well as with the far more important task of following the angel. Argos too relished in their escape, hardly able to move, but wagging his tail as he gazed longingly towards the lit doorway.

From inside, she could see a figure in the distant blue. The angel in flight, carrying something as it departed to heights unknown. For a moment, this broke Penelope's brain. Her principal desire and motivation were to follow it, but that was suddenly impossible. She did not feel sadness or defeat, but that her own failing was impossible. A conflict that left her stunned and staring out the opening. As she did, the tenth minute passed, the tenth since Argos pulled her away from the angel. Were she not dazed before, the sudden change seemed poised to knock her to the ground. The scent gone, its effects faded from her mind; she was left to question the motivation forced upon her. Though she remembered that state of mind, she could not fully grasp it; though she wanted nothing more to put it behind her.

Finally free, Penelope looked down at Argos in her arms. So close to escape, he forgot the pain in his side, thinking only of that blessed escape he had scarcely dared dream of. Holding each other close, they stepped into the warm sunlight of the outdoors. Alarms and chaos behind them, all the world ahead. They walked out under the blue sky, free at last.