

Working Like a Dog: The End

—Holding the bleeding Argos close, Penelope sprinted from the facility and into the open air. She looked around in a panic, searching for any cover hiding place. An alley across the street, unmaintained and dark enough to hide them.

Staying out in the open would not be an option. As alarms blared and an angel flew off into the sky, a crowd gathered and gawked. None had noticed her, but such a gift would not last them long if she stood around like a deer in headlights. They were not exactly a subtle pair; a ragged woman in a lab coat; a bloody and broken dog. Closer inspection proved Argos as even more conspicuous than that, neither human nor hound; his hind legs and hips still had the joint placement of his old legs, much of his face lacked fur, and his shape remained somehow wrong.

Clutching him close, she sprinted across the road into the cover between buildings. Once covered in the shadow of bricks and cement, she collapsed against the rust of a dumpster. Panting with arms weak, she dropped Argos behind the metal bin and looked back. Though smaller than he once was, he was larger and heavier than the dog he was becoming. Adrenalin and desperation were all that allowed her to carry him this far; without them, she could not drag him.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” she murmured, looking over the knife wounds across his side. “I couldn’t control myself. That thing’s words... I’m just sorry,” she whispered, realizing nothing that she could say would make it right. He didn’t seem to respond to her words, panic gnawing at her mind. The cuts were deep but not lethal, at least as long as she could stop the bleeding.

Grunting as he lay on the dirty pavement, Argos felt an unceasing cold crawling through his body as though ice were spreading through his every vein. His vision and thoughts blurred as

his blood ebbed away. Like he was underwater, a voice came muffled through the haze. He could recognize it as Penelope's voice, but the words themselves were lost to the blur. Sharp pain shot through his side, a fuzzy figure doing something to the wounds. As quickly as it came, the sensation faded into a clammy numb.

He would have laughed had he the strength. It seemed a joke. Surviving so much, only to die in the gutter like a rat.

Penelope wrapped her coat around Argos, the binding tightly enough to make him yelp. Red stains spread across the white cloth; her hands left coated in the crimson ichor. She would save him. Though she was not in control of herself, she wielded the knife that did this. If he died here because of her... She would not allow that.

"Argos, stay here; stay hidden. I'll be right back," she said, putting a reassuring hand on his neck as she started away. He curled his chin, holding her hand there as if to prevent her from leaving. "I'm not leaving you, I promise," she assured, pulling away, though it pained her to see him look around in fear and confusion as they separated. Steeling herself, she stepped away from the bin and ran down the road. With time against them, she hurried through streets and alleys, wind rushing past as she made her way for the car.

—Lying in the corner with rats skittering around, Argos felt exhausted, his head bobbing to fend off sleep. He wanted only to close his eyes and rest. But he knew that if he did, he would not wake. Inside, he felt an uncomfortable, sticky heat. Noticing the damage, the nanites that were transforming him diverting their efforts to mending his wounds.

Snapping his jaws, he summoned a weak growl to warn away the rats. Ears perked, he could hear commotion from the crowd beyond; voices of onlookers, cars slowing and stopping,

and the static clicks from of police and security radios. “Mom, there’s a dog,” a young boy called out, peering down at him. Argos’s pulled back his lips and snarled, surprised by the sudden arrival. What frightened him more were the boy’s calls, calling more witnesses, possibly captors. “He looks hurt.”

“Get away from there!” a woman snapped, her kid trudging away. From the direction of her voice, she could not see him, save for his tail poking from behind the cans. “What have I told you about going near stray animals,” she hissed, pausing as she peered in Argos’s direction. “Oh God, that thing must be sick. Let’s go. I’ll call animal control,” she muttered, her voice growing quiet as she backed away, her phone beeping.

Shit! Argos thought. He could hardly wait around for a dog catcher to find him. But moving was not a guarantee given the extent of his injuries. A whine resounded through his throat as he took slow, forceful steps. Fortunately, it was Penelope’s car that pulled up by the curb.

Without wasting a beat, she jumped from her car and rushed into the alley, searching behind the dumpster where he had hidden. He attempted to stand, but his wounds felt like they were tearing open, and he slumped over. “Here,” he called out weakly.

She asked no questions about his new hiding spot, for they had greater concerns. Hefting open the door, she crouched down and wrapped her arms around him. “This is gonna hurt,” she warned, ready to lift him again. “Stay with me.”

—An awkward quiet filled the car as they drove back. The familiar streets seemed unwelcoming and foreign to Argos. For Penelope, it brought a flood of relief, like finally pulling out a needle that had been stuck in her for days.

“You still awake?” Penelope asked, intermittently making sure that he was awake.

“Yeah... I think the bleeding’s stopped. Sorry, I think I ruined your seat,” he murmured; some of the cold and haze had faded from his head.

“Don’t worry about it. It’ll wash,” she lied. Far past concern for a seat. “In a few days, we leave. Just because we’re out of that facility doesn’t mean we’re in the clear. Keep an eye to your exits and your ears peeled,” she warned, her attention turned to the mirrors. “With all the evidence I have to sink them, with that angel still on the loose, I don’t think they’ll be invested enough in you to keep after us.”

“After that, we put everything behind us?” he asked, groggy but feeling a spark of hope in his chest. No more than a candle attempting to warm a room.

“Everything behind us,” she murmured wistfully, squinting slightly as her apartment building came into view. “Leave behind those jobs, those people, this place...”

“Those lives.” Another spell of silence fell over the two, unsure if they were excited, mournful, or just nervous.

Once inside, they took care to lock and bolt the door, closing the blinds once they scanned their surroundings. Finding no one, they finally allowed themselves a moment to relax. Penelope applied rubbing alcohol to Argos’s wounds and bound them as best she could with gauze. He noticed the fatigue in her eyes, feeling his own beginning to mount. “We’re as safe as we’ll be,” he said, as she rechecked the peephole. “Get some rest. After everything, we could use some.”

“Thank you,” she offered, watching him lie down and curl up on the couch. Gravity seemed to intensify as she neared her room, her own body weighing so much that she could hardly stand. All the exhaustion, stress, injuries, and fear of that day seemed to compound in those few moments. Though it was the late morning, she felt as if she had not slept in days. Walking through the door left her overcome with fatigue so intense that she barely made it to the bed before falling unconscious. Blood would stain her sheets and pillows, but she hardly cared.

Downstairs, Argos could not find the same relief. Even after the apartment door was locked and bolted, he felt uneasy in the space, like he did not truly belong there. His wounds ached, and his bones felt stiff. Beneath his skin, he could hear the popping of joints and the churning of flesh, the nanites still transforming him from within. He was not the same creature that stayed in this apartment before. Being here only reminded him of what was lost.

Somehow, he felt that if he drifted off, he would awake from a dream and find himself back in that horrid laboratory. Even when he pushed aside those worries, he wondered to what he was escaping. Pretending to be a normal dog was the only life awaiting him. Had all his aspirations and struggles left him no more than a pet? Perhaps Artemis’s mind or memories would erase his own, leaving him no more. He wondered if such a fate was even so bad.

Late in the afternoon, Argos jumped from the couch and padded across the room. Not until he had taken several steps did the haze of waking fade, and he realize something. Walking and moving on all fours came without a second thought. Never before had his mutated body felt so natural as to be forgotten. His limbs were better shaped for a quadrupedal stance, even if his hips still had a ways to go. His many wounds from the night before were closed by the machines.

Memories of the facility were slow to fade. Alone, he sat in the center of the room, awaiting something. In the lab, leaving or staying were not choices for him to make. He dared not open or scratch at the doors, for he was trained instead to follow. After a moment, he realized his mistake. Approaching the kitchen door, hesitating for a moment, nervous to defy commands of distant men. He opened it with his jaws and entered, feeling strange to decide simple things like location or meals himself.

Soon, footsteps broke the silence, and Penelope walked sleepy-eyed into the room. She still wore the clothes from the escape, a pause to her movements showing that she had not entirely left the place behind. He could sympathize. “Morning, Argos,” she said, casting a joking look towards the setting sun. She smiled with a quiet relief that they had both survived, able to truly enjoy a mundane, happy moment. “Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, brows furrowing.

Argos had unconsciously taken up a different pose. Head turned to the side to show his throat, and tail tucked between his legs. It was subtle but fearful and submissive.

“Are you ok?” she asked, reaching down to put a hand on his cheek.

He shrank back from the touch, almost lowering his head to the floor as his heart quickened. She meant him only kindness; he knew as much. But the approach of humans had only meant painful tests or training, their touch only humiliation or punishment. Even for her, it was difficult to shake these reactions.

“It’s ok,” she said, stepping back and forcing a worried smile. “I can’t imagine what you’ve been through. We’ll move at your speed,” she reassured, kneeling before him as he allowed her to put her hand on the side of his face.

“What... What happened in there?”

“... A lot,” he answered simply, faltering as memories conjured themselves.

“Like I said: your speed.” She leaned forward and touched her forehead to his. He closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. After a few seconds, she pulled away, leaving him standing in place blankly.

She fixed them what she could with the limited supplies she had left, frying several eggs with oil and salt. Argos could no longer sit at the table, and she placed his plate onto the floor. He felt no shame or embarrassment at eating from the ground. Perhaps because his experiences had hardened him beyond it, or perhaps because they had already broken his pride beyond repair. Finally given a meal better than the gruel of the lab, he practically inhaled the meal.

“What do you say we go early, get out of this place and let the movers bring things over?”

“That sounds good,” Argos murmured. Somehow, this felt wrong, eating a meal as though nothing were amiss, Penelope avoiding speaking of his new form. He did not want to be what he was, did not want to be reminded of it. But somehow, her pretending that nothing had changed was worse. Honestly, he was not sure how he wanted her to treat him. Likely, there was nothing she could do that would make him feel right.

“Maybe on the way there—” she began, but he stopped her.

Instead of expecting her to come up with an answer that even he did not have, he tested the waters himself. “Penelope, what do you think happens after this? What happens with us?”

It caught her off-guard, leaving her stunned for a moment. “We risked our lives to save one another. Do you think I went in there expecting that we could walk away as things were? I don’t

know what comes after this. Up until..." she glanced at the clock. "Thirty minutes ago, I didn't have the luxury of thinking about the future."

"I'm not accusing you. But the future will come for us whether we plan or not."

"What are you afraid of?" she asked, sitting back down and touching his cheek.

He could think of several things. His mind might degrade, and he would forget who he was, which would break her heart. She could realize the extent of his changes and the uncrossable distance between them. *What would happen then?* If she left him, he would be helpless. A stray dog at the mercy of an animal shelter. But she, too, would realize this. Too good of a person to abandon him, she would suppress this and chain herself to him miserably.

"We're not normal people, Argos. We didn't go through normal things. Moving on... what we'll face will be anything but normal," she said, dropping down to his level. His eyes fell to the floor, unable to meet her gaze. "I risked my life to save you. I knew you wouldn't be the same as you once were," she said, moving her hand forward. Her fingers passed through his fur and over his muzzle. "Give me some credit. I'm not gonna start resenting or ignoring you because of this. Who you are goes deeper than that... And what's in there, that hasn't changed."

"But what if these things do?" he murmured, his joints buzzing with heat as the changes continued. "I feel my mind bent and slipping. Perhaps I will be gone soon, or no longer myself. The doctor said—"

"The doctor? The crazy bastard who held and tortured us like animals? The one who said his serum would heal your shakes and nothing more? Yeah, he's a great source of information."

"But this I can feel."

“Maybe that’s only because you believe that you will,” she reassured, hugging him close. “No matter what happens, I’ll watch your back, and you’ll watch mine; we’re in this together now.” Her voice remained honest and sincere, steady as iron as she believed every word she spoke. It was not a cure, but hearing this did raise Argos’s heart. He trusted her, trusted his happiness.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but thank you,” he whispered. Eyes closed, embracing one another as best they could, able to hear one another’s heartbeats.

Yet, all things must come to an end. She touched her forehead to his before breaking away. “This old life of ours is over. Let’s not drag out our leaving,” she suggested, turning and looking out the window. He nodded; this house, this place, they felt foreign and unsafe. Leaving them behind, even in theory, seemed to lift a weight from him. “Is there anything you want from your place?” she offered, pointing to her keys.

He looked down to think things over. His wallet was here. Other than that, he owned nothing of significant value. “No, let the landlord sort through it,” he muttered. There was nothing in that place he wanted to hang onto, no reminders of that life worth dragging with them.

“Then we only need to clean this place up, bring over what we need. I have a few perspective places to stay. Until then, I’m sure we can find a motel to keep us.”

They wouldn’t need much, and she packed two suitcases quickly. He mostly sat and watched. She preferred to work small tasks alone, seeing help as another getting in her way. It was funny to see the absolute focus that came over her, and her blindness to everything around her.

Argos remained close to the door; his senses tuned for the outside. He could appreciate these changes, his ears perked and his wet nose twitching. Footsteps moving through the apartment halls, faint smells from those passing by, and an awareness which seemed unrestricted to any sense.

None were watching or stalking them, as far as he could tell. Though safer, the state made him jumpy, every passerby making him pause and resist barking in warning.

There he remained until Penelope came to him, her brow slick with sweat and a suitcase in each hand, a third dragged behind her. “Everything you, Yin, and I will need until we find a place,” she said with a fatigued smile. “There’s only one thing left to do—” Glancing first at the clock, she walked over to the phone, grimacing as she saw seven missed calls. “Couldn’t have saved you without Kurtis and Gio’s help. They don’t know what happened; let’s give them some peace.”

“Kurtis was involved... Gio?” Argos asked, surprised and concerned.

“Kind of. They didn’t see what I saw; ran when things got bad,” Penelope said, shaking her head as she slowly dialed the numbers. “It’s good they did. If they don’t know anything, they won’t be targeted... They probably shouldn’t see you.”

“I owe them a goodbye,” he said, looking back over his furred flanks, his bushy tail swaying slowly behind him. “But they don’t need to know what I am... Shame, I would have liked to give a real farewell to Kurtis.”

“Not everything gets to end the way we want it to,” she said, pressing the call button. Two rings stretched on for longer than they should, both worried there might be no answer.

Halfway through the third ring, it clicked, and a voice came through, louder in speaker mode. “Penelope!” Kurtis answered, almost shouting into his phone.

“I’m here, Kurtis. Argos is too... we’re safe.”

“Oh my God. Gio is with me. We thought— You were still in there when the sirens were going off. How did you—”

“Kurtis... We made it out; we’re safe.”

“That’s great! We’re waiting for you guys to—” Gio started, speaking excitedly.

“We can’t meet you; we can’t see you guys again,” Argos interrupted, surprised as his voice escaped his throat.

“Argos, is that you?” Kurtis asked hesitantly. “You sound different. Are you ok?”

“I am different, but I’m ok.”

“That’s good to hear,” he murmured, a bit of white noise coming through the line as they remained silent. “How the hell did you two escape?”

“We weren’t the only ones down there who wanted out,” Penelope explained, her and Argos sharing a knowing look. “I don’t know if it was a gift from heaven or the Devil’s luck, but something down there helped us.”

“At least you’ve got something on your side. I’m glad you two are out. So why—”

“Just because we escaped doesn’t mean those people aren’t still out there. The less you know, the better,” Penelope warned, the other two pausing to consider the threat. “You both have our sincerest gratitude, but you can’t see us.”

“I understand,” Kurtis said. “Shame, I would have liked to say goodbye.”

“Really, Kurtis, I owe you my life,” Argos said, struggling to overcome the changes to his muzzle and throat, almost sounding like he once did. “Thank you so much. I’m sorry I can’t say this in person but thank you.”

“I’d say *keep in touch*, but I guess that isn’t an option anymore.”

“Not yet, not for a long time. You’re a good friend, but this is farewell,” Argos offered.

“Goodbye, Argos. Hope you have better luck wherever you’re going.”

“Goodbye,” Argos said. An uncomfortable silence hung between them as she placed the phone in her pocket. “I’m kind of glad they didn’t see me. They’ll remember me as I was,” he murmured, falling to a seat in a sphinx-like pose.

“Nothing left for us here,” she said, patting her two packed bags.

He was surprised. She was so willing to pack up and leave. However, another glance proved it was not so easy for her. She stopped at a wall riddled with bullet-holes, putting her hand against it and looking around the room.

“Feeling nostalgic?”

“I’m supposed to, aren’t I?” she chuckled, running a finger around the charred hole where he had missed a shot. “I don’t know... I feel like... like a phoenix. This part of my life is over and dead. I’m moving on, starting anew. I don’t need mementos or photographs. I don’t need to cling to years of my life that I spent not even trying to be happy.”

“There’s a long drive ahead of us,” he said, taking one of her bags into his mouth, looking to help in any way he could. “Let’s start this new life of ours.”

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—Penelope noticed them as she pumped gas. Holding the whirring nozzle, she saw a grey car parked down the road. It seemed like a normal car; nothing to be suspicious about, except for the fact that she had seen it following her. It was furtive, appearing and disappearing, always

keeping another car between them. She was careful to only look at them in the mirrors, wondering what was going on behind that black glass.

Putting a hand on her hip, she felt her pistol attached to her belt. She could walk over, make a big show, and scare them off; she wouldn't even need to fire a shot to do so. No, if she provoked, they might respond with violent force later on. Outmaneuvering them in her slow van would be difficult, especially when city life left her with all the driving skill of a teenager. For now, she could only keep her weapon on-hand and hope the car was only there to observe.

She climbed back in and started driving again. Beside her, Argos slept on the passenger seat, covered with a blanket so that passersby would not notice him. Healing his injuries sapped his strength, left him sleeping with deep breaths like a young child.

Smiling, she reached under the blanket and placed a hand on his side. He felt warm, feverish almost. The process still worked within him, seemingly hastening as the stress of the lab faded behind them. Rubbing her hand over his stomach, she felt something strange. A bump of skin on his underside. At first, she was confused, bringing her hand back to inspect it. He stirred in his sleep, and she realized a canine nipple.

Pulling back like she'd been shocked, she covered him again and returned her hand to the wheel. Her face flushed red, and she shook her head to clear it. She felt embarrassed, like she had walked into someone changing. Those transformations were private, his alone to tell of.

Instead, she turned her attention to the dark road ahead. Their afternoon sleep left her schedule thrown, and she drove them south at ungodly hours. Alone on the highway, they sailed endlessly through the winding black, headlights providing yellow cones ahead. Eventually, her hunger overcame her, and she turned off at the sight of a neon sign.

“What?” Argos murmured, roused by turn. He poked his head out from under the blanket, looking around in dazed confusion.

“Rise and shine,” Penelope chuckled, pulling the cover back over his head. “I’m getting lunch, dinner, or whatever you call a two-thirty AM meal. You want anything?”

“I’m always hungry,” he joked. Feeling his empty stomach clawing at his innards, he wondered if these side-effects would end with the transformation. Thinking on that, he realized that if faded, he would have fully lost his humanity. However, the prospect no longer filled him with such terror and disgust.

Penelope ordered from the sleepy sounding employee within, and they stopped in the far corner of the parking lot for their meal. She searched around as they came to a stop, relieved to find the persistent grey van no longer with them. At best, they had lost her. More likely, they were observing from some perch or distant hiding spot. *Go ahead then, watch us eat*, she thought, knowing she could do nothing to stop them just yet.

A dry, fast food burger tasted wonderful on an empty stomach. Beside her, Argos greedily scarfed down a large order of chicken nuggets. His sense of taste was diminished. The meat lacked something, a rich flavor that saturated the food he was given in the lab. As he thought about it, he realized, it was blood. His new tastebuds preferred something fresher.

“Nice night,” he murmured, looking up to the clear sky full of stars.

“No light pollution,” she said, glancing out the window into dark woods around them. “Means we get to see all the heavens. Kind of a shame we’re going from one city to another.”

“We can enjoy the countryside after you’ve started your job,” he said, shaking himself once as he stood up and removed the blanket. “It’s funny, I never actually did leave that place,” he mused, receiving a raised eyebrow of surprise from her. “Parents weren’t the vacation sort, only ever brought us out of the city for my uncle’s wedding an hour away. I always said I would go off and see the world... you know, once I got out of high school,” he said, looking listlessly at the reddish glow on the horizon from a nearby town. “Of course, I had college after that. Then I needed to work and couldn’t afford to travel. Kept me working until I was always too tired to try to change things. Didn’t think I would finally leave like... this. But somehow, I’m still excited.”

Covering her mouth, she tried to hide a giggle as she saw his tail wag at the prospect. “Well, we’re not really free from that last one, but I’d like to think it’ll be better than that station,” she said, unconsciously putting a hand on his side as he lay down. Her gaze followed his to the seemingly candle-lit horizon. “Course, I won’t be able to bring you to a lot of places. We’ll have to get you registered as a service dog.”

“Just as long as they don’t try any training,” he joked, mirth hinting the final word.

“I think that’d be fun. Get you sitting and fetching on command like a good dog,” she prodded. “Argos is hardly a dog’s name. What should we call you? Artemis? Spot? Fluffy?”

“I hate you,” he chuckled, shaking his head.

“Can’t say I don’t deserve it.” She smiled and shifted in her seat. Glancing in the rear-view mirrors and around them, she made sure they were alone. “I’ll be right back. Hide if you see anything,” she instructed, stepping out and making her way towards the bathroom.

He nodded and watched her leave. It was funny, knowing his mind was merging Artemis’s, he paid close attention to any foreign instincts or thoughts. Unquestioning loyalty and a desire to

see her happy, he wondered if it were the instincts of a dog or his honest feelings. Distracting himself, he scratched an itch on his outer thigh. Doing so with his teeth still felt strange and unnatural, but he could get used to it. He licked the spot to groom the ruffled fur. Not thinking about the act, he continued to clean himself.

One leg raised; he felt a twinge of discomfort. Even after she saved his life, he hid this change from Penelope. A tightness that made standing uncomfortable. Though he knew this part of the transformations was coming, but still blushed with shame as he thought of it. The idea of telling her was beyond what his wounded pride would allow.

Barely covered by fuzz, his manhood was shrunken and malformed. Below it, his jewels had vanished, and the skin around them pulled taut against his body. Cleaning instinct briefly seizing him, he licked the smooth section, finding only bone beneath the skin. Sense returning, he closed his legs and hid himself. Flushed with embarrassment, he became keenly aware of the sensation of his skin brushing against itself, like a sticky tickle that sent a shiver down his spine. Feeling it only made him more conscious that he would soon be unable to call himself a 'him'.
Dammit! Do you really have to take every part of me, Artemis?

His eyes worked better in the dark and seemed keen to follow movement, the cars leaving streaks of light behind them as they passed. Twin headlights glared in his eyes as a car peeled into the driveway. The van stopped suddenly by the side of the venue, the door swinging open too swiftly and deliberately. Two men stepped out and started purposefully towards the entrance.

His fur stood on end, and he showed his teeth, sensing something terribly wrong. Clawing at the door, it swung open, and he jumped onto the pavement. He suspected the men from the lab would return but did not think it would be so soon. Charging two armed men would be stupid, but

he had to do something. Clinging to the shadows, he searched for an opening. One of the men stayed by their van, the other entering the venue with a hand at his side.

Argos wanted to make noise, to warn her somehow, but needed to do something about the second man. Slinking through the darkness, he watched the man in the parking lot. Ears raised but crouched low to the ground; he felt his heart racing and senses heightening. Crickets sang around them, the highway rumbling from distant cars, and the faint smell of the man's sweat on the breeze. Most of all, his eyes honed on the man's throat, primordial instinct burning deep within him. Though distant, he was a hunter, and he could almost taste blood.

The man looked away, closely watching the entrance. Seeing the attention leave him, Argos felt a jolt shoot through his legs. He charged forward with fangs bared before he even realized that he had moved. A snarl escaped him, and the man jumped. Argos might not have been able to win a fight with the large man, but if he could cause commotion.

The man turned, shocked, and reaching for his weapon. His reaction came a second too late as Argos bowled into him, sharp teeth sinking into his arm as he guarded his throat. They fell together, but Argos held fast, shaking the limb with such ferocity as to rip it off. Screaming in pain, the man fumbled and dropped his gun. Argos lost himself in the violence.

Sense returning, the man delivered a powerful blow to Argos's face. Even dazed, his teeth stayed locked. Several more punches rattled his brain and rang painfully throughout his body. Weak from previous wounds, he knew this a losing battle and let go.

His legs felt liquid beneath him, but fortunately, the man seemed equally stunned. On shaky steps, he darted away, taking cover around the corner and crouching low. Inside, he heard a crash and shouts; the staff roused and worried.

The man he attacked pulled out his phone, dialing swiftly. Before he could bring the machine to his ear, thunder echoed from within the building. Everyone jumped at the sound, gunshots blasting from the bathrooms. Argos's breath caught in his throat, panic and worry gripping his heart. *Was there something else I could have done? Is this my fault?* He thought, mind racing a mile a minute.

Penelope broke the tension, bursting through the door towards the exit. Her eyes wide but focused, her gun raised to her chest. The man Argos had attacked fumbled for his weapon, fearfully watching her rush his way.

"Try it!" she shouted, kicking open the door and aiming for him. Face blank with panic, he froze, allowing her to pass.

Argos ran as well, joining her stride as they ran for the car. They peeled out into the road before even closing the car doors behind them. In the venue, they could see the employees in a panic, calling the police and frantically describing the events.

"What the hell happened?" Argos shouted; the smoking pistol tossed onto the floor.

"I heard something outside. Then this stupid fucker bursts in," she murmured, coming down from the rush and looking around the dark highway. "He took a shot, but my aim was better."

"What did you do?" he asked, knowing the law would not help them here.

"I'm not an idiot. Aim close enough that they miss, but that he feels the wind. Sent him ducking and cowering long enough to escape," she assured, holding the gas as they flew down the road. Not enough to convince him, she continued. "No cameras in the place. Only people who could find us are the two that won't report us to the police."

“Still, that was close. I owe you one.”

“Please, saving each other seems to be our *modus operandi*. I didn’t think they would be after us so soon.”

“It was two idiots in a van, not their A-Team. If I had to guess, most of them are probably dealing with that damn angel. Don’t worry about them. I’ve got a plan.

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—As they neared the city, the dawn began to break on the western horizon. The sun did not yet crest over the rolling hills. Instead, the midnight-black skies turned pale-blue on the distant horizon. Without a word between them, they came to a stop by a small hill. They made sure none were following, silently waiting in the car for anyone who might follow them, Penelope making sure that she had rounds in the clip.

It took only a few minutes to ascend the hill, where they found seats on the grass and watched the sunrise. Trees, mountains, and buildings formed an indigo horizon, the sky above taking a hint of gold. Penelope reached over and put an arm around Argos. He leaned over and rested against her shoulder. Only able to see in blues and yellows, he wondered what he was missing from the sight. Instead, he found new beauty in the sweet scent of the fields on the breeze.

“We’re in the home stretch now,” Argos said, flattening his ears as they leaned back against fresh dew. “Are you ready?”

“Somehow, I am,” Penelope said with a smile, the cold of the grass piercing her shirt. “Before all this, I was scared. How does a station security guard go-to defense in the capital, even at a low level? But we broke out of Frankenstein’s lab. What could threaten us in DC?”

“Nothing,” he said with a smile. She reached over and pulled him close, an arm remaining wrapped around his side. Head rested on her chest, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the quiet sound of her heartbeat. He could have stayed there, but she pulled him up and kissed his cheek. “Penelope, I’m...” he stammered, skin buzzing and head spinning.

“I know you’re not going to turn back. I know we’re as different as any two people can be. I know that it took us years of vague flirting and more near deaths than I care to count for us to be honest with one another. But I don’t care.” Sitting up, he put his head over her shoulder, pressing their necks together. Feeling flushed with warmth, his tail wagged unintentionally; a reaction he initially tried to suppress but soon cared nothing about. “We jumped bodies for a living. I love you, not the form you take.”

Unable to return the kiss, he brushed his forehead against her cheek. “I owe my life to you; I’d gladly give it for you. I love you... so much that I can hardly remember what it was like before I felt this way. Trying to think of myself back from then is like thinking about another person.” She held him close and buried her face in his fur. He closed his eyes and let the world around them fade until he sat in the void with her scent and warmth. “I guess I am technically a different person.”

They laughed and rose back to a seat. “We should get going. Who knows how long we have before someone catches up with us.” He nodded, and they started back down the hill, dew sounding crisply beneath their steps. By the time they reached the car, the sun began to crest over the horizon. Golden rays glimmered like diamonds as they passed over the grass.

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—Reaching the city put the two on edge. Too many cars and too many crowds, all while they were automatically suspicious of everyone. Unlike the tall buildings of their city, they were

surrounded by the brickwork of new construction meant to appear old. Penelope found herself offput by the difference, unsure what to look for in the unfamiliar place. Argos found that he preferred the difference, putting everything further behind them behind.

Ahead of time and unable to move in, they found lodging at a nearby hotel, one of the few that allowed pets. They parked instead across from the hotel at a slightly cheaper inn. She purchased a second room, making sure they saw her and had her name. They snuck across the street, watching their fake room where anyone tailing them would think they stayed.

“We can’t keep this up forever,” Argos said, ears perked as he peered between the curtains.

“About that,” Penelope started, pulling a hood over her head. She kept a nervous eye down the road. In the few hours since they arrived, they saw the still stalking them. It tried to hide, barely visible down the road behind another car. “I’ll be back soon. Be careful.”

“What are you doing?” he asked, clearly concerned.

“Finishing things.”

My father once told me:

“Care only about those you can protect; protect only those you care about.”

I know you may think you can recapture us, plug the leak, or whatever term you want to use. When you make these plans, I’d like you to remember the damage I caused the last time I interacted with you. As far as I’m concerned, we’re done with one another. I don’t care to speak of what I saw down there or ever see with you bastards again. However, if you want to try to get your subject back or contact me, I recommend you look through the many, many photos included.

You can keep them if you like; I have plenty of copies to spare. If I ever get the feeling that any of you are watching me, there's a lot more people who'll find this evidence as well.

I'd say I enjoyed our time together, but that would be a lie. Goodbye.

Once away from their real room, she made her presence obvious. Penelope smiled to herself as they followed. Moths to a flame. She sat down in the first café she passed, typing swiftly on her laptop. Whether they were watching hardly mattered, as she placed the message on a thumb drive and left it plainly on the table. They could find her little letter to them, scare them more than any armed threats she could ever make.

Though she suspected the warning would ward them from coming back for her, she remained cautious. She allowed herself a small victory and happiness as she returned, finding the van no longer watching them.

“You’re back!” Argos exclaimed excitedly. “I was getting worried. What did you do?”

“Gave them a final warning. Keep on guard, but I think we’re in the clear. At least, as much as we’ll ever be.” They shared a relieved silence, smiling to one another as they felt a weight lifted from them. To celebrate, they opened two small bottles of liquor from the min-fridge. Only when finished did the stress and exhaustion of the night’s drive reach them. She practically fell into bed, and he followed, curling up a distance away and slipping quickly into darkness.

—“I figured they would try to hide it,” Penelope muttered, the two watching one of the many sighting videos of the angel.

“If they bother to take them down, it gives legitimacy to the videos. Left alone, they’ll be forgotten like any other cryptid hoax,” Argos guessed, tapping the phone with his nose to pause it.

“Guess so, but it must kill those doctors’s pride to let randos report on their failures,” she chuckled, pocketing the device. “Alright, remember, no talking.”

“I’m not an idiot. From here, I’m just a normal dog,” he assured, holding still as she secured a collar around his neck. “How do I look,” he joked, turning his head as if posing. In truth, he did not mind the piece as much as he thought he would; after a moment, he forgot it was there.

“Again, sorry about this,” she apologized, looking across the parking lot to the vet’s office.

“Security dog needs a checkup and certification. I get it.”

Though he feigned nonchalance, he was far from comfortable being leashed into the vet’s with Yin. Even before entering, he could smell the heavy odor of fear, harshened by the acrid cleaning chemicals that seemed to fill the air. He remained stoic none-the-less, quieting his nervous instincts and laying down as they sat in the waiting room. The screams from a parrot across the room got on his nerves, compounding with constant whining from two other dogs. When they were finally brought into the office, it seemed a relief.

Penelope and the vet traded documents and questions. Argos found himself quite nervous, shifting around on the cold floor tiles. They had waited until he looked entirely canine, but he worried that the doctor might notice something he had overlooked. Clearly anxious, he realized that he looked less tame than well-trained Yin.

Making sure Yin was in shape for service was fast. All the old certifications still held, so the vet only needed to make sure he remained physically healthy, checking teeth, heart, and a few

other tests. “This one’s good,” the vet said, the young woman shooing Yin off the table. “You have the paperwork for the other one?”

“No, only just picked him up. I don’t have any paperwork on him.”

“Vaccines? Chip? Not even adoption records?” the vet asked, receiving a shake of the head each time. “Did you kidnap him, or pull him off the street?” she chuckled, annoyedly taking out a stack of documents. Argos remained quiet and still as he received his shots, better behaved than most trained animals. They refused a microchip, thinking it a bad idea to put a tracking device into him. It took some time, but eventually, he had all the documentation of a normal pet.

After his shots came the physical exam, the part he had dreaded. Security dogs needed a certain level of physical health. Cold, gloved hands ran through his fur and prodded his joints, all making his skin feel flushed and his heart race. The touches made him feel like he was back at the lab. Shifting on his feet, he closed his eyes, trying to push down fearful instincts. Forgetting about the situation proved difficult, her thumb uncomforting pushing her lip to examine his teeth.

“That’s weird,” the vet murmured, cautiously pulling back more lip. “His back teeth... they look flat, almost human... Are they loose?” she murmured, prodding one.

Shit, shit! He cursed internally. As sharp fangs grew in, his old teeth fell out; but some still remained. If she noticed, she might report it. They would hear about it. They would find him again. They would take him back! He would go back!

Fortunately, she seemed too bored to take note, moving on. However, that was not enough to calm him. She grabbed his snout and turned his head forcefully to the side. A gloved hand pushing him to the ground, lifting his leg to inspect him further. He could almost feel a syringe

drawing blood, nodes on his head examining the nanites, that bastard of a doctor's voice ringing in his ears. *They would kill Penelope! Then, they would take him back to that lab and trap him!*

His heart raced. He could hardly feel the vet's hands anymore, only a claw of panic around his heart. That furious pulse filled his ears, deafening; the air so heavy that it seemed like it would crush him. The backs of his eyelids turned red, a sickening hue. He could feel the bite of the knife in his chest, that same red spilling out across the station floor. White. His vision flashed white as he opened his eyes, a crash like lightning in his mind. Springing to his feet, he lunged forward and sank his fangs into the vet's arm.

—The vet did not intend to sue, unsure if she even could. A danger of the job. Argos was unfit to serve as a security dog. That much was obvious in his behavior. An assistant held Argos down, and the vet stuck him with a sedative. It hardly seemed necessary for what remained of the exam, but the woman was angry.

Penelope felt numb, still shocked by Argos's burst of anger. Logging him as a security animal was little more than a formality, something to make him seem normal beside Yin and with her. For now, it was unimportant. Silently, she filled out the closing forms, nervously stealing glances at Argos sleeping sickly on the table.

"The... Argos is healthy. Just get him trained," the vet snapped, nodding towards the dog for her to pick him up. "Where did you find this thing?"

"He's a rescue. The kennel didn't give me many papers," Penelope answered, wondering how much of a mistake it was to bring him here. More so, she worried about Argos. He clearly

was not ok. The woman may not have noticed his panic, but she knew his tells, knew what it was like to be within an alien body.

“Trained better than any other I’ve seen, until she’s not. Multiple strange mutations, but perfectly healthy. Also, you keep calling her a *him*.”

“What?”

“Just... Look at her,” the vet said, handing over the last file.

With a sigh, Penelope nodded. She did not want to test her luck any further, decided to bring him back to the hotel. Without asking for help, she tucked the papers under her arm, held Yin’s leash in her hand, and lifted Argos into her arms. Awkward and heavy, she could hardly hobble back to the car. Sweating, she dumped him into the passenger seat, wiping her forehead.

A single chuckle escaped her, and she looked out across the unfamiliar skyline. “I’m an idiot,” she said to herself, realizing the absurdity of thinking they would leave all their problems behind in the old city. “The people we choose to love,” she murmured, looking down as his head hung limply over the side of the seat.

Curiosity overtook her. He would slowly become Artemis. She knew that. But he always remained quiet about the process. She gave him his space, figuring it best for him to respect his privacy. That desire disappeared for a moment as he slumped over onto his side.

“Don’t tell,” she whispered to Yin, gingerly gripping his hind leg. When she lifted the limb, she first thought it the way his fur fell. The area under his tail didn’t quite look female, but he lacked male equipment. When she ran a hand over his stomach, she could feel tiny nubs beginning

to poke from his underside. “Sorry,” she whispered to him. She could understand why he kept this to himself. The changes were surely embarrassing.

—Strange dreams. Ever since this process began, Argos had the strangest dreams. When he woke, he figured them memories bubbling up from Artemis’s brain. He would see moments of her life from her eyes; relive experiences without his memories. Now, lost in a haze of drugs, he saw a blur run past, his own memories and hers running past below him.

It was like a thousand paintings were thrown into a river, and he was trying to find the original images by the tide of mixing dyes. Sinking, he felt the waters washing over him, the blur buzzing into his mind and taking all other thought. It would take him, wash away features as he melted into the unintelligible blend. Holding himself together was like clenching his every muscle, easy at first, but only becoming harder with every passing second.

Remaining himself hurt, dragging all the weight of his damage and inadequacy on his shoulders as he walked over coals. Why cling to that? Why fight the flow trying to take everything away from him? It seemed so easy to let the changes take him, to let his mind simplify to that of an animal. It would fit his body. And what had he to cling to?

Penelope, she was something he did not want to forget. Pulling his head above water, he focused on the image of her. However, he was greeted by another face, Artemis, sitting expectantly before him. Could he rid himself of her, separate the two? As if in response, she approached, pressing her forehead against his. Here, he could make out her memories in the river.

Steel walls and bright fluorescent lights, a cage, and the smell of fear. Fear crept into him; the lab seeming to rise around him. No, no, this was another place. Time moved quickly. He

watched handlers come in and out of the cell. This was Artemis's past, her early life in the kennel and in training. Her own emotions came back; powerlessness, confusion, and terror.

I know what that lab was. I was born in such a place. It doesn't scare me. It can't. He was unsure whether that was her voice or his own. The distinction between the two seemed tenuous. Resisting, he threw aside the thoughts. He would not allow her to overtake him. Just as suddenly, the water overtook him. Horror at what he had seen and what he now was.

He could not fight, that battle would drag on every day, and he was too weak. But he was not done, not beaten. Swimming against the current would drown him. Surrendering to it would take everything away. Maybe for help, maybe for comfort, he embraced the figment of Artemis.

Humanity was taken from him; he could hold it no longer. He was no longer Argos; he died when the nanites were injected. But he was not so lost as to relinquish his mind. He would not become Artemis; she died that night at the station. They no longer knew what they were.

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Light streamed back through the darkness, fog dissipating as the drugs left Argos's system. He blinked away sleep, sensation returning part and parcel. The room spun, flying and dipping as the car came to a stop. As numbness ceased, a throbbing behind his eyes called out like a bad hangover.

"Welcome back," Penelope greeted, seeing him stir.

"I'm back," he murmured, piecing together scattered memories and images.

The car lurched to a stop, parked before their hotel room. Neither moved, remaining quiet as they stared at the door. "What happened back there, Argos?"

Shaking himself, he looked around, still getting his bearings. “I’m broken,” he said, sinking back into the seat.

“What do you mean?” Penelope asked, her confusion turning to concern. “I thought you said that—”

“I was wrong!” he snapped back. “Memories, my past; they’ve been scrambled and made painful. I can’t tell anymore what’s mine, what’s real, if I want to remember, or if I even can.”

“Who... Who do you think you are?” she stammered, unsure how to approach such a thing.

“I remember being Argos. I know that I am him. But as my changes end, that life feels so distant.” He bowed his head shamefully, wondering if he would lose what she had loved him for.

In response, she leaned over and embraced him, arms wrapped around his neck. “We left that distant place behind. I’ve watched you change, inside and out. But you’ve kept what matters. You’ll keep what matters.”

Unable to return the gesture, he smiled and hooked his chin around her shoulder. “I’m sorry that I hid all this from you. I don’t... I don’t know how you’re supposed to talk about this,” he murmured, his tail curling between his legs. “Guess Argos isn’t a fitting name anymore.”

“Probably good for you to keep things like your name constant. You need to stay grounded,” she said, stroking his cheek. “But... You aren’t wrong. Calling you that in public might raise eyebrows or draw the attention of people we don’t want to remember us,” she said, muttering more to herself as she thought out loud.

“Two names? I suppose that fits as well as anything for someone in my situation,” he mused, stepping back slightly. She looked at him, letting him choose his name. Though he was

becoming Artemis, that name seemed wrong to take, especially as he tried to distinguish himself.

“Selene... I like that name.”



—Once they were sure Argos would not panic or break, they tried again for certification. Easy enough to fake training; he had gone through the other side of the process thoroughly. Mostly, he found it strange, like an out-of-body-experience. Penelope shouted commands to him, and he tried not to seem like he understood the whole conversation between *‘his owner’* and the observer.

Moreover, she found her conscious mind quiet. All that mattered were the commands. Only silence existed between them. Once spoken, strings could have manipulated her limbs, for all the control she had over them. Not that she would resist, for she could conjure no thoughts of disobedience.

“You did great, Argos,” Penelope said, carefully folding the certificate into her pocket.

Hearing the name snapped him back. Only a momentary pause as he recalled the person. “Real tricky. Sit, seek, heel, bark... hard for such a dumb animal to remember all these words,” he chuckled, lowing his voice as they stepped out of the car.

“Well, it’s something. Even if only a test for our little ruse. Don’t you think, Selene,” she joked. Though she knew his task was harder, she had worried about her acting ability. These past few weeks brought out a better liar in her than she knew existed. “You sure you want to do this? Go back to sniffing bags in places like—”

“I want to do something, to work. I can’t think of any other jobs available to someone like me,” he said, crossing the threshold into their apartment. A small place, only a few furnishings

keeping it from emptiness. Most of Penelope's things were too difficult to transport, instead sold and awaiting replacement.

He felt a lightness in his steps, claws clicking on the tiled floor. Optimism had proven untrustworthy, but he allowed it nonetheless. Things had been quiet, the remnants of the lab respecting their threats, and no one else paying them any heed. Excitement and warmth flushed through him and he shifted back and forth on his paws.

"You seem happy," Penelope said, an honest smile creeping onto her face.

Pausing, Argos felt his tail wag slightly. He liked that, wanted to see that expression on her more. "I think I am. It's always seemed out of reach until now, but our lives are starting now. We can be together; just live."

Lowering herself onto one knee, she put a hand onto his cheek. "I'm glad it's time. Spent so much time avoiding being happy. I don't know why it took psychopaths and surgeons to do something about it, but at least we're finally here."

Enjoying the warmth, he leaned into the touch, expecting nothing more. Instead, she leaned forward and kissed him. Equal parts sincere and awkward, she planted it on his nose. Surprised, he felt the touch like a jolt of electricity. It felt as new and strange as the first time, when he was in school. Now occupying his new body, he supposed it was his first. He responded with a slight, affectionate lick to her cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too," she said, standing up and stepping back. He craned his neck, trying to maintain eye-contact. "How are you... with the process and everything?" she asked delicately.

“Things seem to have petered off. Can’t say if they’re fully done,” he explained. Still unaccustomed to his new form, he did not know what was normal and what was the nanites. “As for my head... I don’t know,” he said, knowing this what she cared most about. “Argos, the human, doesn’t feel like me. He feels like someone long dead. It’s not like I’m someone else. Sometimes it’s hard to shake the training, sometimes hard to ignore instincts, but I can always come back.”

“Good to hear,” she said, starting away. “Unfortunately, I have some work to finish.”

“Got it,” he said, remaining by the door as she left. Seated there, he felt a twinge of guilt for lying. He trusted her, only wanted not to worry her. Artemis no longer spoke in his mind; it was no longer distinct. She was Selene. Selene was just another name that the whole of himself could go by. Frequently, his thoughts would slow, returning to the simple obedience of a dog. He could come back easily, but it was like standing up; negligible at first, but the effort would compile, and he would have to slip back.

Physically, the nanites seemed complete; his body indistinguishable from an average dog. Embarrassingly, this meant his body was female, something he discovered while cleaning himself. Penelope still referred to him as ‘*he*’, which was enough for him to think the same way; at least, while his mind was present. However, this came with new processes. He felt a churning around his hips, an ever-present discomfort and flush. Too embarrassed to look up the feelings online, he was certainly not going to inform Penelope about them.

Shaking his head, he hoped they were the final shifts of his change, soon to disappear. Perhaps it was his optimism rearing itself, but he was not worried about the changes. Even if they did not fade, he knew far worse; he could adapt.

In the other room, he heard annoyed mumbling. Low and muddled, he knew that Penelope was typing on her laptop. With little patience for paperwork and managerial duties, she would often mutter and grumble to no one while working. To provide small comfort, he trotted into the room, finding her at her computer. She smiled slightly as he lay down, leaning slightly against her.



—Noticing Argos’s agitation, Penelope turned and looked out the window. Dark blue settled across the expanse of sky, nighttime met with a scatter of streetlights and illuminated windows. A gentle breeze blew against the glass, the city quiet and inviting compared to their old home. “We should go out,” she suggested.

“Night walk in the park?” Argos asked, cocking his head to the side.

“It’s a new city. We should explore it,” she said, figuring they could use some time outside. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

Still slightly tepid but willing, he nodded and padded over to the door. He slipped the collar on, a trick he had learned to do himself. It itched his neck but was a simple enough cover, certainly better than being caught as a stray. Seated by the door, his tail wagging with anticipation, he waited for her to return. Instead, he heard a beckoning whistle for Yin.

“What are you doing?” he asked, rounding the corner to her room. Sitting on the mattress, she prepared her harmonia gear, affixing the nodes to Yin.

“It’s part of my job; I can’t let the body become too unfamiliar,” she explained, the crown and nodes illuminating as the configuration finished. “Might also be good for you to... deal with that side of yourself.”

“Are you my therapist now?”

“I need to do this, and I like company on my walks. It’s a nice excuse.” She leaned back, placing her hand above the main button. “The two of us can see in the dark and have sharp teeth. We’ll be fine... If you don’t want to—”

“No. It sounds nice,” he murmured. She nodded and pressed the button, leaning back with her eyes closed. He noticed the strangest twitch, a sudden limpness as her mind departed. A second after, Yin jerked to attention, stunned as she seized his body. “Welcome back. Just like old times, isn’t it?” he said as she took a tentative step forward, their eyes meeting.

“~~Rush~~ ~~raaah~~,” she growled, prompting a smile from him.

Speaking as a dog did not come easy to him, like learning to swim by being thrown into the ocean. Even now, his imitations without proper lips, cheeks, or vocal cords sounded wrong and required a second of interpretation. Still better than her garbled growl. Rather than try at conversation, he took to the door, opening it with his jaws. She trailed behind, seemingly in a daze. He wondered if she was actually rusty with that form, uncomfortable using harmonia like he, or if something else was clouding her. It hardly mattered. Once they started towards the park beside the building, their trots gained speed and bounce.

—They made their way quickly down the stairs and across the parking lot. Soon, their paws met cold dirt, wind rustling through their fur. Tinged blue by night, they saw well through the dark, new smells greeting them as they arrived. They broke into a run, Penelope surprised by how naturally Argos moved in his body. Struggling to keep pace, she followed the white underside of his tail like a guiding light through the night.

It felt like a lifetime ago that she had done this. Strangely, it did not remind her of her time at the station. That felt so distant and different, and she could not remember a time that she used the gear outside. A flood of new sensations greeted her, a chill in her skin, dew-soaked grass beneath her pads, and the fresh scent of leaves. She could lose herself in the serenity of it, surrender to simple instinct.

With some distance from the building, they came to a stop. Though they could still hear the bustle of the city nearby, they found a comforting solitude in that small clearing. As he stopped, she hurried forward and nipped at his neck, jumping back as he turned. Ears perked and tail wagging, she felt an excited lightness in her chest. It was elation that she could not explain; joy to be out there with him.

—Momentarily confused, considered her sudden playfulness. He could not shake some worry about her choice of form. Maybe their relationship felt more natural when they shared a species. Did he turn her stomach? He would understand, but that idea still saddened him.

Dispelling his doubt, she stepped forward and gave a quick lick to his nose. Perhaps she wanted nothing more than to see him in a different light. So, in their little grove, bathed in pale moonlight, they danced.

—Penelope could see Argos's trepidations fade, letting his hound-half peek through. They darted back and forth, taking little nips at one another and playing like pups. Heart racing and eyes gleaming, Penelope felt herself possessed, lunging and dodging without thought. With a swift motion, she knelt low to the ground and dashed forward. She got beneath Argos and flipped him over. In an instant, she stood atop him, a paw placed upon his chest.

Beaten, he lay on his back with stomach exposed, paws curled up on his front, and an excited smile still on his face. Stretching up and lapping at her chin, he sent warmth throughout her body. She stepped off and let him stand. He did so slowly, twisting his back as he lay in the grass. Even on his feet, she could see a different look in his eyes, a lack of inhibition he had not allowed himself up until now.

That look disappeared suddenly, and he jumped forward. Gripping the scruff of her neck, Argos pulled Penelope into the bushes beside them. She blinked in confusion but understood as footsteps passed. A jogger on the path, only a few feet from them. The man seemed not to notice them, fortunate, as she did not want to be chased off as a stray.

Once the man had passed, she blinked in thanks to Argos. That man escaped her notice entirely, even with her improved senses. Something was distracting her, leaving her mind clouded. An unfamiliar scent hung in the air, heavy and wispy like invisible mist. Though faint, it captured her curiosity and almost drew her into a trance; one which seemed too natural to question or resist. Trying to identify the smell, she found it sweet and thick, untraceable but wanting.

—Even after Argos pulled her into the brush, she seemed unfocused. *Strange*, he thought, for instinct had never overtaken her before. He could feel a similar draw, like inviting warmth echoing within him. That feeling built up within him, an electric heat which would have made him sweat. Hiding from a possible threat, crouched low in the overgrowth, he felt his heart racing. The thrill of the chase ran through him, but without the fear of an actual threat.

Turning back, he nodded to Penelope. A silent agreement to continue away from paved paths. It was good to see her happy. Since everything began, they had known relief. But never allowed excitement.

Savoring the feeling, he nipped at her ear and dashed off. She knew the game and gave chase, stumbling behind him over root and mud. He could escape her, flee fast enough to disappear into the night. But any time he began to do so, he stopped, waiting just long enough for her to catch up. With a coy glint in his eyes, he would allow her to see him, to grow near, but never reach him.

The deeper they fled into the trees, away from the city, the more he felt Selene controlling him. On his glances behind him, he could see Penelope slipping too; but she never allowed a second voice as much control.

—Selene's tail stood as she ran. When she turned, it swished and fanned the air. Following a trail of scent and occasional glimpses of Selene's white tail, Penelope's mind quieted, and he felt the traces of Yin taking control. As the pair were swept further and further into the moment, their old selves lost importance. Their roles switched, and that which made them hounds guided them.

Though Penelope lacked the agility of Selene, his strength did not wane. He would turn trees or burst through a bush, seeing her waiting with a sly look on her face. Yet with each approach, he would find himself closer, able to hear her panting and see the light reflecting in her eyes. Eventually, she hesitated a second too long. With a burst of speed and energy, he caught up and rolled her.

In only a second, he stood atop her again, both their tails wagging as their hearts slowed. As they calmed, he began to wonder what had come over them, her humanity returning. However, she leaned up and playfully closed her jaws around his muzzle. A warm lick dispelled his thoughts, the rush flooding him again.

Jumping to her feet, she stepped close, rubbing her neck against his. He closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, following his motions and feeling both their hearts flutter. She stepped

forward and ran her flank against his, both beginning to circle one another. Though the chase ended, they retained a quick pulse and heat in their blood.

Her scent overpowered his senses, their steps weaving together into a slow dance. Their waltz quickened, and the surrounding park faded. The world beyond mattered less and less. Penelope could hardly think but hardly cared to. Selene knew what possessed them, happier than ever before to feel invisible binds tying them together. She had no desire to leave, content for this second to persist for all eternity.

“I love you,” Selene managed, calling what few vestiges of her humanity could respond. From the look in his eyes, he hardly heard the words, but understood every part entirely. The words could barely suffice. She always felt this. But only now could the affection be expressed, could it so enrapture them. Every heartbeat resonated through him with a tingle like static electricity.

Body acting faster than his brain, Penelope began to rise on her hind legs and stand atop her. Each time, Selene shook him off but nuzzled him as encouragement. Playing coy only worsened the ache of want in her, growing unbearable as she questioned the instinctual response.

His persistence won out; her game too painful to maintain. Alone in their empty world, a glance back broke her resolve. Suddenly, touching one another was not close enough, her ache so great that another second of waiting felt fatal. She lowered herself on her forepaws, tail wagging in anticipation. Penelope needed no further invitation, his skin blazing as he jumped up. Front legs locked around her hips, and he lay atop her. They were all that mattered, all that existed. Soon, they stood alone in the endless black, their passion a lone star burning in the night.

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—Sunlight barely graced the morning sky, the expanse above lilac and gold as morning arrived. Light streamed through an opening in their ‘den’ onto the sleeping pair. A faint tickle roused Argos from sleep, his sensitive nose twitching as something brushed against it. Opening his eyes, he smiled, Penelope’s tail idly brushing against his face as she slept.

After separating, they curled up in the hollow of a larger tree. Before long, they drifted off, comforted by one another’s presence. When he awoke, his head rested upon her side, her eyes moving slightly as she neared consciousness. His motion finished it, and she glanced around bleary-eyed.

“Morning. That still you, Penelope?” he asked, still foggy from the night before. She nodded, her head resting as she watched him happily. “Have you ever been outside your body for so long?” She shook her head, *never by choice*. “We should get back; you’ll get sore.” She shook her head, putting a paw atop him before he could rise.

They could lay there longer, together in their pocket of the world. Comforted by one another, they watched the sun rise on a new day.