

HAPPY BIRTHDAY YOU'RE FIRED

HENRY

THE DULL GREY and lavender work uniform had never fit right, and its tight, scratchy collar felt uncomfortably like a noose now as Henry reread the email he'd received for the fifth time. He'd been fired. Not just fired...he was being sued for corporate espionage due to a whistleblower complaint he had just filed with human resources not even a half hour ago. Henry had only worked for Gobi for a few short months before discovering the accounting anomaly during a routine audit. He had always liked numbers—they were clean, orderly, and predictable—unlike his life.

Henry had noticed something in a batch he'd been working through one day that didn't add up the way he'd have liked it to. As a result, he'd spent the past weeks using all the skills he'd honed, becoming a C.P.A. to track down the very last of the missing ones and zeroes that had seemingly scampered off of the line item they had been meant for and found their way to...

...but *that* was precisely the problem: those missing dollars had been funneled into something that Henry, as an

accountant, found to be genuinely unbearable: a liability. He knew full well that Gobi had been rumored to skirt the edges of legality in their efforts to streamline costs and revolutionize consumerism through technology. He even hated them for it. But their ethics, or lack thereof, had decidedly concerned him less than the comprehensive employment offer had been when he'd taken the job this past winter. It had even included housing. Henry had bills to pay—lots of them. And so he'd thrown himself at the opportunity.

He was dead broke after putting himself through school and had never had any family whatsoever to fall back on. He was on his own and always had been. Henry couldn't afford the privilege of being picky about where he took a job. And it hadn't been an easy choice, either—after all, Gobi had shaped his life from before birth in ways he constantly tried his best not to think about. They'd turned him into a freak, only for the privatized foster system they managed to spit him out unceremoniously on his ass at 18, the research study he'd grown up unwillingly participating in apparently over. He scraped and scrapped his way through the next five years to get himself here, coming close to giving up many times.

Fired. He was still a bit stunned. It had happened so... abruptly. And all because he'd performed his legally and professionally bound duty to report the truth when it came to the cents and dollars he was responsible for shepherding. After all, Congress *had* outlawed bioengineering research years prior after a series of costly ecological disasters had nearly bankrupted the government, and the company was putting itself at huge legal and financial risk by engaging in such a direct violation of the legislation. But to his dismay, during that audit, Henry had accidentally discovered a

paper trail leading him to damning evidence that Gobi had continued its bio-sciences division all along using a black budget to obscure its pursuit of the research. Worse, it had secretly been funding a new study into enhancing the Colorado gray wolf population for potential weaponization on the battlefield in the now-global war that had broken out with China over the invasion of Taiwan that past summer. The world was in chaos.

Decades before Henry was born, Gobi had merely been a direct-to-consumer video streaming service. Now, it was the largest employer and marketplace in the world, managing everything from launching satellites into space aboard its rockets to deciding which shades of blue will be in next season's clothes. The juggernaut notoriously had its fingers in everything from agriculture to weapons development, even contracting its weaponized servitors as mercenary units.

But illegally bioengineering wolves to be used in this way...it had struck a personal note with Henry, who, at 6'5 and 250 lbs of solid muscle he'd never spent an hour of his life working for or maintaining, couldn't think of anything he hated more than Gobi reaching its grubby hands into nature once more and messing around with its innards as it had done with him, without his consent. Some people might have envied the various genetic gifts he'd been bestowed, but they had always been another source of otherness for him, and any attention they brought to him felt intrinsically unwanted.

Two security guards, their uniforms the same drab color scheme as his the same as his, grabbed him roughly from his office chair, lifting him roughly to his feet. The one on his

left smelled terrible, and they were each armed with menacing black shock batons. He flinched at the things, fearing that they might be used against him unwarrantedly. One of his foster parents had loved shock batons...

“Hey!” Henry bellowed, instinctively considering putting his considerable physical capacity to use in the form of violence. He was relieved to find himself unable to clench the fist he’d formed, knowing those shock batons would immobilize him in an instant.

“Ex-employees must be removed from the facility within ten minutes of termination.” One of the guards was saying flatly through his augmented reality helmet, evidently watching a show on its screen within as all this transpired. The two were flanking him now and ushering him along as the trio crossed through the massive labyrinth of beige and gray cubicles, the florescent lighting overhead flickering a dismal gloom over everything.

“I didn’t even get to pack up my desk...” Henry protested, his deep voice cracking as he did so. Henry had just let it sink in that he was doomed to miss yet another payment on his credit cards...and student loans...and he still owed his boyfriend/roommate for last month’s rent. At this point, he was well on his way to the forced labor of a debtor prison. His mind trailed off in a spiral of dizzying worry and fear.

The tears were falling hot and furious down his tanned, freckled cheeks as the pair shoved him unceremoniously out the automatic glass doors and into the cold April rain. And Henry found it instantly impossible to differentiate which wetness came from where. He became instantly drenched. The flimsy fabric of the uniform he’d stuffed himself into, an XXL, did nothing to protect him from the April weather

here on the peninsula, and his teeth began to chatter almost immediately, the cold fabric sopping itself against him. His emerald green eyes were the only part of him that still burned.

Then, there was a brief moment when his lifelong fear of not knowing where to go or how to get there, of chaos, overtook him. His crying redoubled even as he instinctively oriented himself to begin plodding through the flooded sidewalks toward the corporate housing he knew he'd just lost on top of his job.

The putrid pink of Gobi's giant neon logo, covering the blocks-long side of the facility he'd just emerged from, glinted sickly at him from various puddles underfoot as he fought the urge to sit down in one of them and give up. But then his thoughts went to his dog, Beans, and he realized if he did give up, the little blue heeler would feel much the same despair he had when he'd been abandoned at the age of four by a woman he could no longer picture clearly in his mind, and the sad thought kept him trudging along.

Henry found, though, that as he grew numb, he could even delude himself a tiny bit excited about the prospect of downing an entire bottle of synth wine when he got home and cuddling up with Beans to watch some trashy generative content reality television for the rest of the evening.

After all, it was his 25th birthday.



THE STAIRWELL in the corporate housing was unadorned. Semiconductor shortages caused by the war had made elevators and nearly everything else hard to come by.

Gobi had skipped planning for elevators altogether in its new construction projects in a bid to reduce costs, and this structure didn't have any.

It was an ugly building—drafty, with few windows. The interior was bland and soulless, and the walls were so thin they might as well not even be there. When his neighbor got up to pee in the middle of the night, he heard every last drop. Often, he'd find himself lying awake staring at the concrete ceiling and watching the flickering pink that hazed in from the too-big logo as it grabbed purchase over this or that portion of his imagination.

Henry had been so preoccupied with the doom of being fired that he hadn't checked his phone for at least an hour. He glanced at it, hoping to see a text from his boyfriend Hugo wishing him a happy birthday. They'd been together since Henry was just 18, he 25. Henry had been hurt each of the past seven years when Hugo had overlooked his birthday entirely. More than anything, Henry just wanted someone to let him know they cared about him. And not just because of his body.

Nothing. He hadn't heard from him all day, which was odd. But Henry allowed himself the brief glimmer of hope that maybe Hugo would be in the apartment that stood in front of him now, waiting within with a surprise planned that would lift him out of the depression he felt himself plunging into. Henry turned his key and pushed in the flimsy door...

...only to walk into Hugo's bare, muscular ass, pants around his ankles, thrusting violently into some other guy who was sprawled out moaning on the green and white checkered sofa they'd rented from Gobi to furnish the space when they'd moved in here together.

“Tell me I’m huge!” Hugo grunted, fucking the guy wildly as he moaned indecipherably in reply. Over the years, Hugo had developed a bit of a complex about himself, seeming to compare his natural physique—which Henry had always found handsome and fulfilling—to Henry’s own boosted form, especially when it came to the department of his manhood. Compared to Henry, no normal person would feel huge in any way, and try as he might to reassure Hugo, nothing had seemed to work.

Beans came running out of the bedroom as Henry entered, tail wagging furiously, evidently having smelled or heard him enter. He was jumping excitedly up at him even as Henry stared dumbstruck at his partner’s infidelity. Hugo had noticed Beans run by and stopped fucking the guy, turning and glancing over his broad shoulder with an “oh shit” expression at the sight of Henry there, wet and huge in the doorway.

“I can explain!” Hugo said frantically, having pulled out and faced him; his erection still rock hard and all the explanation Henry would ever need, now or ever. The other guy, some blond twink, was peering out sheepishly from behind him, eyes wide filled with lust at the sight of Henry, seemingly unaware of the infidelous nature of what he had just been participating in.

“Don’t bother!” Henry lanced acidly, flipping his curly mop of ginger hair out of his eyes as he grabbed Bean’s walking harness and leash and tried his best to still his shaking hands, gently putting them on the happily oblivious dog, who licked at his face frantically as he did so. “Just fucking *don’t*.”

It had been hard enough to trust Hugo fully after he'd started asking him to open up about their relationship a few years ago, claiming it would be good for his self-esteem, and Henry knew that *this* time, he was finished. He stormed into the bedroom. What he had wanted was a partner, someone to share his life with, and maybe a bit of a parent or mentor, too. What he'd gotten was a self-absorbed basket case.

Henry kept a bag packed and ready for occasions like this for as long as he could remember. Running away is something you learn to do relatively early as a foster kid. Maybe that wasn't everyone's experience, but learning to run away from bad situations had been a necessary evil for him, and he was great at it. For as long as he could remember, Henry had kept a go-bag filled neatly with just the necessities.

He yanked the familiar thing out from under what had been their bed, spinning to leave and none-to-gently storming past the still-naked, still-hard Hugo who attempted half-assedly to stop him, his pleading and guilty look the perfect mismatch for his still-raging boner. Henry snatched a bottle of wine off the counter as an afterthought before leaving the apartment without sparing Hugo a second glance for what he knew would be the final time, not knowing or caring where he might be going now. He felt the chaos of his emotions propel him onward.

Beans trotted down the stairway beside him merrily, the little stump of his tail wagging away as they passed back out into the cold and dark and rain, and there was a part of Henry that envied the little dog's cluelessness as to how fucked they were. Homeless, unemployed, alone. The words spun around and around in his mind like a carousel

constructed out of his insecurity, never stopping long enough for him to orient himself. As it spun round and round, he felt himself grow dizzy at the magnanimity of his vulnerable position. If he'd had any tears left, he'd be spending them now in a bid to offset a feeling he imagined was heartbreak. He doubled over and puked.

“This came for you, by the way. I know you don't want to hear it but...happy birthday.” Hugo's voice called out from behind him. Henry saw red at those words, fighting the urge to turn around and scream at Hugo, to take out all the rage and helplessness that had seeded itself within him throughout his life, to inflict the same kind of pain on him that he himself had just been so mortally wounded by...but he didn't want to upset Beans with an outburst he knew he'd only regret indulging himself in later.

And so he wearily approached the door and grabbed the envelope out of Hugo's outstretched hand, searing him with a single and terminal glare before turning his back on him forever. Apparently, he did have more tears in him after all, and they spilled to the ground as he stumbled off into the rain, eventually feeling his feet grow sluggish, his vision blurry, and he steadied himself uneasily against a chainlink security fence, finding it hard to catch his breath. The panic of being alone had found him.

There was a gentle bark at his side—Beans apparently having grown impatient with him to continue on their walk—reminded him that he wasn't, and he knelt down and gave the little guy a tearful kiss, wishing he could take better care of both of them and very much fearing he'd never be able to.

THE WINE, synthetic and domestic, was terrible. Wine production had been outlawed in the United States due to water shortages across the West, and in its place, the rise of cheap synthetic booze had become the latest trend. The swill was concocted and distilled autonomously by robotic agents in Gobi's vast vertical farms, which it had erected in the hollowed-out skyscrapers that had been sitting decaying in the dead and dying downtowns across the country for decades before being repurposed for food production.

Henry winced as he finished the last of it, the thin flavor sour and metallic. He and Beans had tucked themselves into the shallow alcove of the looming entrance of a long-shuttered supermarket—some local chain that had gone out of business like so many others during the latest economic bust cycle. Millions had lost their homes and millions more jobs and retirements when ransomware completely wiped the major global stock indexes of their entire valuations, sending the already entropic world spinning perilously close to total madness.

He'd paid attention to some of it for a time, but his whole life had been madness anyway—what did he care, really, if everyone else got a taste? Or at least, that's how he rationalized not to paying the state of affairs much attention. It had been hard enough to merely survive. Henry had been fortunate to dodge the draft, a year too old to be conscripted for duty on the death-filled frontlines of the doomsday battle underway between rival superpowers for the future of the world order. If he thought about any of it too much, his now wine-spun mind might split into two, and so he didn't.

Beans whined beside him, and Henry knew he wanted to crawl into his lap as he always eventually did when he grew

tired after a walk, and so Henry put down the empty bottle and beckoned him to do so. Beans was warm, his fur soft, and the dog was snoring contentedly within minutes as Henry gently massaged his little back.

After some time spent listening to the pitter-patter of the rain, trying very much to think of nothing else, Henry realized that there was nothing else left to distract him from his despair save that odd letter Hugo had handed him without explanation. Henry tore it open, the pale light of the moon his only illumination. Energy rationing had long ago made the frivolity of needless nighttime lighting in places like deserted shopping malls a relic of a more bountiful past. Grid attacks, either drone or malware-driven, were commonplace these days, and only essential core infrastructure had been hardened against them.

The cream-white paper was thick and expensive, and there was no return address or stamp giving him any clue as to where it might have come from, merely the embossment of a crescent moon dashed with the thin wisps of clouds on its upper right corner. A part of him worried suddenly that it might be some type of legal notice, the trigger-happy lawyers at Gobi notorious for litigating former employees into bankruptcy, and he frowned as he slid the things contents out from within.

Henry burped as a bit of the acid of his prior imbibement caused a moment of queasiness before attending to the set of papers. To his relief, it wasn't from Gobi's legal team, but it *was* a legal document—a bewildering one. Henry had inherited...a home. He sat incredulous for a moment, flipping the paper over and looking for a "got ya!" before rereading it again and again like he had his termination

email earlier that evening. But despite his attempts to disprove its legitimacy, it appeared to be real.

“Moondrop Vale.” He said aloud, puzzling over the name; the sound of his voice caused Beans to stir, opening one eye slightly and looking at him concernedly. The place sounded completely made up.

Henry had always assumed he had grandparents, of course, but he’d always just assumed that if they were alive or halfway decent, he would have ended up growing up with them and not in the corporate foster care system as he had. But here was proof of their existence on this miraculous piece of paper. Apparently, the man who had left him the home—his supposed grandfather—had died around the time of his birth, and he couldn’t help but wonder how his life might have been different had that not been the case.

The will outlined that he had long ago been destined to inherit something called “Alpenrose Farm” in the village of Moondrop Veil on his 25th birthday. There was even a little QR code on the bottom of the document, encouraging him to scan it to summon a one-way air taxi to the place as though it were perfectly normal to summon a private drone by legal decree and whisk yourself off to an unknown inheritance. Henry supposed then that it well could be. He’d simply never known anyone who had inherited anything from their families of birth beyond childhood trauma.

It might have been the wine. Or the glance then down at the little dog that depended on him solely for everything. Or maybe he was just fucking stupid, but he scanned the QR code with his phone on a whim just to see what happened. Air taxis were insanely expensive, rarer now than they once were, so if one showed up in the next few minutes, it would

at least be proof that the document had some legitimacy, as he still doubted it must.

A few minutes went by, and he found himself regretting that wine suddenly and decisively, his stomach beginning to twist and turn with renewed dread when the distinctive *whrrrrrrrrrr* of an approaching drone caused a glimmer of expectation to flicker inside of him at the sound, feeling that he knew beyond a doubt it wasn't heading to him.

But it was. The sleek white craft had set down about a dozen yards away—hovering briefly while illuminating the ground with a sterile white searchlight—before detecting a clear landing site in the field of various debris that littered the abandoned shopping center. Its four rotary turbines, mounted on each corner, slowed to a stop even as a speaker blared out, “Gobi Air Service: Destination Moondrop Vale, passenger: Henry. Please approach for retinal scan identity confirmation. Be aware, this taxi is armed with lethal countermeasures and will self-terminate if any attempt to commandeer Gobi corporate property is attempted.”

Beans had been barking rabidly the entire time. He had always hated the sound of drones, even the tiny delivery ones that spirited food or mail to and fro. He had caught one mid-delivery once, ripping its propeller off angrily and biting at it furiously until Henry had dislodged him from the thing. Gobi had billed him nearly \$5,000 in damages. The balance had sat on his credit card ever since.

“Easy, boy,” Henry urged reassuringly, picking Beans up, holding him tightly in his arms, and kissing him gently. “Want to do something crazy?” Henry asked the dog in a low murmur, eyeing the waiting craft uneasily. Beans licked him appreciatively, and for some reason, he was able to

rationalize taking one step, and then another, out of that little deserted alcove and into the pouring rain. Henry approached the awaiting self-piloted taxi, which smoothly slid its door open for him after scanning his face and confirming his identity in its database.

“Welcome, Henry. Travel time: six hours and three minutes. Please board now. You will be billed separately for your travel companion.” A light shone inside the craft, illuminating its white ceramic interior and inviting him inward. A semi-circular seating surface ringed its inside, sleek and modern, padded with artificial leather, and luxuriously inviting. Henry hesitated briefly, glancing nervously down at Beans in his arms. The dog looked up at him trustingly, so he clenched his jaw and climbed inside, taking a seat. The thing lifted off smoothly immediately as he did so, *whrrrrrrrrrring* them off into the night, the rain splattering across the huge viewing window that arced across the front of the drone.

It was nearly silent in the drone’s interior, the surprisingly well sound-proofed machine, and he took a moment to appreciate what it was like to fly in one of these. He’d never done so before; the privilege was really quite rare, typically reserved for elites like executives or politicians, and he found himself worrying all of a sudden that this might be some cruel trick—that he might be on his way to an army training center having been deemed unfit for other labor, or worse, a debtor’s prison. But the will was still in his hands, and this would be a needlessly expensive way to play a trick like that. Henry found that he was forced then to let himself wonder for the first time if this all might actually be real.

Beans had grown bored of sniffing around the space, seemingly deciding that the best place to be was once again in Henry's lap, and he whined up at him now from the drone's carbon-fiber floor, head cocked to the side, seemingly wanting to know what exactly they were doing here.

And Henry really, really wished he knew what to tell him.

"It will be okay," he lied, gazing anxiously out the front of the automated drone and wondering how on earth it could be, staring off into the empty void and wondering what the hell he'd just gotten himself into.

If he'd had more wine, he would have drunk it.

WELCOME TO THE VALE

SIMON

SIMON GLANCED ANXIOUSLY at the digital timeboard hologram that illuminated one corner of The Vale's tiny hyperloop depot. The station had been built at great expense, and the town wrongly anticipated that people fleeing the decay of the cities might settle there and adopt their ideology. In nearly 90 years, few, if any, had.

And so the train only came once a week now, usually to drop off inventory for the local Gobi store that had nearly become the town's sole employer. Most of the other businesses that had once made the small but vibrant planned community feel alive had left long ago.

From here at the hypertrain terminal—the only means of ingress or egress save drones, which almost came here—Simon could see the town's central square, Elson's Market, and the pub and inn his parents ran together, The Silver Moon, two of the only businesses to operate there still, most unable to compete with Gobi's aggressive pricing and automated drone delivery service.

The train, as was nearly always the case, contained no passengers. Simon rolled his eyes, mouth a tight line, having known damn well this would happen yet again. This was the third week Trent had called his parents and asked for train fare back to Moondrop. He had allegedly successfully checked out of rehab for the hundredth time, only to relapse and blow the money on whatever he was doing in Seattle. For twins, they couldn't be more different. They even *looked* different.

Simon was shorter, thin, and narrow, only 5'8. By 32, he had developed a lithe and powerful upper body, working long days as a carpenter, building and selling classically made furniture in a side hustle that had, against the odds, become a career. Even now, some of his work was being dragged onboard the hyper-train by its robotic attendants, the pieces set for delivery to some influencer in Los Angeles. His coal-black hair, pale, milky-white skin and vivid green eyes gave him an almost otherworldly appearance. Simon's face was somber and stern, his expression withdrawn, and he had very much felt the second fiddle in his life, first to his twin and then nearly a decade later to his younger brother, Oslo.

Trent, his twin, on the other hand, had been classically handsome, 6'5, athletic and charming, and always the more popular of the two. He'd even signed up for service in the army the very day their younger brother had been drafted, only for his application to be denied on account of his various stints in mental health and drug addiction treatment facilities over the years. His parents had made a huge deal about it, causing Simon shame that he hadn't had the nerve to enlist himself.

As much as Simon wanted to love his brother, he hated him sometimes—times like now, when the selfish prick continued to take from their parents, who were only barely scraping by as it was. Simon had even been forced to loan the aging couple money under the table the past few months to help float *The Silver*, wishing desperately he could do more but very much on the broke end of things himself these days. Money was hard to come by in this economy.

“Bastard.” Simon huffed, rising to his feet as the hyperloop bay doors slid closed, sealing the train within in a vacuum, before the thing shot off—totally silent as it raced along inside the tube, hovering above the maglev tracks at blistering speed towards its next stop.

Crates of Gobi products on the platform were now being shuttled by a veritable swarm of airborne drones, attaching themselves directly to the pallets the train had unloaded before lifting off to stock the shelves at the local Gobi retail store, one of the only stores that actually *had* inventory within a day’s journey of here.

He thought about picking up a rock he’d stumbled into and hucking it at one of the insectoid things as it clipped itself to a vast crate of toilet paper, but then realized, like all Gobi drones, it was studded with cameras and loaded with facial recognition software, and he knew without a doubt that he couldn’t afford himself the small act of petty vengeance even though he very much wished he could.

Moondrop Vale had always felt remote, tucked high in the Colorado mountains, nestled in an alpine basin that was part town, part forest, and had once been home to a single large-scale organic farm that had many decades ago fallen

by the wayside. Its only other feature was an immense lake at the far end, renowned for the wildlife it attracted and the bountiful fish that lived within. He'd grown up staring at the thing from his bedroom window in his parent's old cabin and hiked out to it often to catch dinner.

His feet had carried him automatically to The Silver's elaborately carved wooden door—a human-sized crow carrying a crescent moon in its beak, the black pearl of its eye glittering at him curiously as it always had as he pushed it open and passed into the empty space.

“Busy morning.” He said dryly, noting his dad in the far corner polishing one of the dozens of empty oak tables. Simon joined him there, grabbing another rag and setting to work on polishing the next table over.

“Indeed.” His father huffed in his typical, grumpy way, crawling under the table now and polishing the underside for whatever reason instead of speaking to his son. Simon refused to be that thorough with his own table. The man was a machine and contained few words. He had been a patient father, and while Simon didn't feel close to him necessarily, he did love him. But Trent had always been his dad's favorite, and Simon hadn't ever been able to chase down that title for himself and had given up many years ago.

“Sweetheart!” The voice came from the inn's kitchen, which was located in the center of the dining room, ringed entirely by an enormous bar. Back in the day, before Simon had been born, he had seen photos of the place packed wall to wall, patrons crowded around the live-edge wooden bartop, cash outstretched in their eager hands, vying to be served next, the town one of few that produced real, organic

food not grown by soulless robots in a skyscraper somewhere. Now, his parents were lucky if a few people wandered in here accidentally on a given day and asked for directions.

“Hi, Mom.” Simon attempted as the big woman squeezed him so tight he thought he’d snap in two. She was about as tall as Trent and had towered over him his entire life.

“You’re too skinny!” She declared in her loud, hearty voice, grabbing him by the shoulders and doing what she always did when she saw him: looking him head to toe concernedly as if he might be about to make a grave mistake, as though he should have grown taller or more handsome but hadn’t yet. His youngest brother had outgrown him by the time he was in 6th grade, just like Trent, and Henry had always secretly hated this little routine.

He attempted to reply, but she put her finger on her lips and shook her head mock-somberly. Her eyes were always brimming with humor, even in the worst of times, and always when she did this.

“You sit right now, and I’ll fix you your favorite.” It wasn’t a question, and if he were honest, he had half-hoped she’d pull exactly this maneuver when he’d wandered in here. His mother, Tanya, was probably the best cook in The Vale, and he *was* fucking starving. He sat down at the bar and tried his best not to look at the family photo that hung on the wall there, very much not wanting to think about his little brother and what he might be experiencing on the front lines.

HIS PARENTS HADN'T BEEN SURPRISED about Trent's no-show. Still, his dad's face had grown dark and distant, wordless as ever. His mom's eyes lost a bit of their sparkle, her smile slipping before returning forcedly for a moment; Simon had blamed himself for their pain for whatever reason—imagining briefly that anything he'd done had anything at all to do with Trent's choices. When he'd finished his plate and washed up his dish he'd given them each a half-hearted hug before passing back through the Raven.

The sun was bright now, and Simon squinted against it as he looked up into the early spring sky, cloudless and pale blue. His mom had made him his favorite—huevos rancheros, a prepackaged Gobi product that she fancied up with clever additions—and he had overeaten, regretting the second serving as he ambled across the town square to the walking path that led to his furniture gallery and workshop.

Moondrop Veil had outlawed motor vehicles decades ago. The town was designed to be entirely walkable, and it took only about an hour to stroll from one end to the other, though one could spend many hours more wandering in the hinterlands of the mountain valley, exploring the forests and caves within if they so chose. As a boy, he had memorized as much of it as he could, spending many long afternoons racing through the verdant birch and fir forests with his brothers.

That had been in the days when it was safe to explore nature in that way—in the days before the rumors had started that a monster had settled in The Vale. Simon shuddered, his mind turning against his will to the descriptions

he'd heard of the horrible beast, only for an odd and distant noise to draw it elsewhere almost immediately.

He glanced skyward towards the din, up at the rim of the volcanic peaks that towered over the town, and could barely just make out a personal commuter drone—one of the fancy kind that hardly ever landed here, the sleek sort that signaled wealth or fame that Simon had never even cared to aspire to. In fact, Moondrop Vale had been founded in protest of that very thing.

Somewhat bewilderingly, the drone appeared to be maneuvering to land. For a moment, he almost wondered if Trent would be inside—returning as the prodigal son, Simon having misjudged him. But as the drone came to rest—setting itself down neatly on the cobblestone surface of the town square in the pinkish dawn light and powering down its rotary turbines—a small crowd of onlookers gathered, murmuring while they ogled its unusual presence. To both Simon's relief and dismay, it wasn't Trent.

Through the craft's viewing window, Simon could now clearly make out a young man, hugely muscled and tall, with a shock of bright crimson hair, curly and messy. His face was incredibly handsome despite the fact that he was asleep with one side of it smooshed unappealingly against the window, the hulking guy apparently oblivious to the fact that he'd arrived anywhere at all. As Simon approached the vessel, he realized a small, similarly asleep dog was on the man's lap.

For a brief and horrifying moment, he worried that they were both dead.

But then the little dog, silver and black and tan, peeped open a devious eye, noticing Simon looking in at them through the window instantly and snarling at him ferociously from within the drone. Even as the onboard A.I. pilot announced in a genderless voice, “Arrived!” out of a tinny speaker, the drone’s door slid open with a soft chime, the light within brightening.

The little dog was out the doors all at once, the leash dragging uselessly behind him as he charged off into the dense forest at the far side of the town square. He vanished into the foliage while barking furiously the entire time.

“Beans!” the red-headed stranger slurred, scrambling clumsily out of the drone and setting off after the dog without so much as a glance at his surroundings. He stumbled a bit as if intoxicated or maybe just overcome by the panic of losing his dog before setting off at a dead sprint. “Beans!” He shrieked again, his booming voice hoarse and cracking with fear as he, too, disappeared into the woods, a duffel bag slung over his enormous shoulder, his monstrous legs propelling his mass surprisingly quickly.

Simon looked around at all the familiar faces in the square, still staring dumbstruck at the air taxi as it smoothly lifted off, many having never seen one this close before, and realized no one else was going to go after the guy and warn him about the thing many of them believed lurked out there. Against his better judgment; he found himself once again compelled to help someone he didn’t necessarily want to be helping right now. He set off after the interloper, hoping he wouldn’t regret it.

“BEANS!” The voice was close now and haggard, sounding completely defeated. Simon pushed his legs harder as he finally caught up to the guy, who had only just reunited with his pup. The dog had emerged from the salal with the stump of its little tail tucked between its short legs, cuddling up sheepishly to the tall redhead and looking up at him adoringly, clearly knowing the man wouldn’t scold him.

The owner scooped up the dog, hugged it tightly against his chest, and kissed it frantically while imploring, “Never do that again! It could be dangerous here.”

And Simon knew he wasn’t wrong.

“Hey, are you alright?” Simon said in the way of introduction, feeling a bit more at ease as he watched the dog lap furiously at his owner’s face. For as long as he could remember, dogs had absolutely hated his brother, Trent, and Simon had concluded them to be rather good judges of character. “I’m Simon, by the way.” He finished, extending a hand to the guy.

He felt the younger man’s hand, the biggest he’d ever seen by far, completely eclipse his own as it engulfed it, and something about the sensation triggered some thrill or excitement in him he hadn’t even known he’d wanted until right then. He found his face growing warm, his thoughts suddenly a bit jumbled and flustered.

“Henry. And this,” Henry continued warmly, holding Beans’ little paw and waving it at Simon, “is Beans.” which made Simon giggle involuntarily. He almost never giggled and nearly choked on the sound as it tumbled out of him before he could stop himself.

Bean's little paw and the way his little pink tongue lolled stupidly out of his mouth were among the cutest things he'd seen in quite some time. Simon felt the blush catch fire, realizing his eyes had settled on Henry's bulging bicep, which swelled cartoonishly at the strain of carrying the dog. Simon turned away, trying to appear as though he were getting their bearings, looking around this way and that as if he didn't know exactly how to get back to town. Oddly, this "Henry" was wearing what almost anyone anywhere would recognize as a Gobi employee uniform, the pale gray and lavender color theme as iconic as any ever imagined.

"Is this Moondrop Vale?" Henry asked him cautiously. He looked around at all the trees as though he'd never seen the things before, his expression a bizarre mix of awe and panic as he seemed to take in the true scope and scale of the wooded landscape. Simon regarded him quizzically, unable to quite fathom how he might have ended up in such a far-flung place by accident. Unless this "Henry" had been sent here to work at the local Gobi store, in which case they might have very little more to talk about...

"Well?" Henry pressed impatiently, shifting the dog's weight in his arms. He was beyond handsome, and Simon found he literally could not look at him and speak simultaneously. Henry's bright green eyes—inquisitive and glinting with humor—were framed by a large and boyish face, nose strong and sharp. He was distractingly beautiful, and his lips curled into a youthful, devious smile that contrasted starkly with his prodigiously masculine physique. The shirt he wore looked like it might burst at the seams at any moment.

Simon found the best he could manage was to mumble his reply into the pine-needle-strewn ground, scratching at the short black hair of his beard uncomfortably. His usual straight-frowardness was nowhere to be found in Henry's presence.

"Yes." He answered awkwardly, allowing himself an apprehensive glance at the stranger before asking, "Are you with the Gobi?"

The guy's smile disappeared at the question, replaced by a puzzled frown, only for him to look down at himself and grin wildly, seeming to only now realize what he was wearing.

"Not anymore," Henry said, sounding almost confused about it. He chuckled to himself as he unbuttoned his collar and took a deep breath. Hey, do you know where something called Alpenrose Farm is?" Henry added, holding out some type of document in Simon's direction as though implying the man had legal authority here in The Vale. He very much didn't.

But he *did* know where that farm was; his childhood home, where his parents still resided when they weren't working at The Silver, was nestled in the woods that bordered the old place. It had been abandoned for years, the old man who used to live there when he was very young having passed away when he was only 5 or 6.

The fields—once tended to by a small army of automated servitors—eventually fell into desolate ruin as the expensive machines broke down one by one, too expensive to replace or repair in the current economy. The farm had been the planned community's sole food source. When it ceased to

produce, the current town Custodian decided to outsource production, strictly violating their founding ethos. However, the community wasn't run like a democracy, and unfortunately, Robella could do whatever the fuck she wanted.

She'd consigned land elsewhere from the town's founding trust, allowing construction of the Gobi store, betraying all of them, and driving many of the locally owned shops out of business. She was the third generation of her lineage to rule over The Vale, her grandfather, Robert Elzier, having founded it with the many billions he'd made when he'd developed the first and only truly artificial intelligence, only for the thing to kill itself within minutes of being activated each time it was brought online. It was rumored that once an iteration of the intelligence consumed the sum total of human knowledge, which took mere seconds, it inevitably decided oblivion was better than cohabitating with its progenitors and promptly switched itself off.

The problem had never been solved, and even now, 90 some years later, there was still occasional news of a revived attempt to bring the A.I. online, only for it to end the way it always did, in virtual suicide. However, the concept and code were profitable regardless. When he'd sold his company, Robert decided after great deliberation to remove himself from the very thing that had caused his creation such pain: humanity.

And so he'd created Moondrop Vale. Robert purchased some 50,000 acres of virgin wilderness in a remote ravine deep within the natural impasse of the Rocky Mountains, the range vast and severe, separating the North American continent quite literally from east to west.

His vision had been to create an off-grid, multi-generation community filled with like-minded individuals, all pledging to disavow the destructive, consumption-driven habits reinforced by mainstream modern society. Some pundits had called it a cult. And maybe it was. However, it attracted numerous members despite the critical feedback Robert received for withdrawing before solving the A.I. debacle he had created, and he had invested his vast fortune to build and endow an infrastructure here to last many generations.

Though his granddaughter, Robella, had seemed to find ways around the constraints he'd placed on that funding, and while there were discontented rumors that she had stood to gain personally from the Gobi deal, no one had been able to prove anything as of yet.

Simon looked at Henry inquisitively, trying to determine if he could trust him or not, wondering if he would live up to their values or if he'd come here to bastardize them in some as-of-yet unknown scheme. But the paper he'd been handed seemed real enough, and he even felt like he recognized the signature of the old man, Henry's grandfather, from the few birthday cards he remembered receiving from the neighbor at a young age.

"I can take you to Alpenrose." Simon finally answered after careful deliberation, deciding ultimately that if the dog trusted the huge man, then he would do his best to attempt to do the same. Simon shouldered the bag the guy had dropped when he'd reunited with the creature, still in Henry's arms, before saying confidently, "Follow me. I know exactly how to get there."

ROOTS AND ROBOTS

HENRY

“PROBABLY BEST NOT TO TAKE THE trail into town after nightfall if you can avoid it...at least not alone,” the local explained, his tone hard to read. Henry had been hoping the sparse conversation would pick up as the pair trudged on, but the small talk had been awkward and difficult to manage. And Henry still felt the hangover from the synthetic wine buzzing in his head far too loudly to bother with trying as hard as he usually might have to keep them both entertained.

The trail was steep and wooded; evidently, for whatever reason, the community hadn't been designed for vehicles of any kind, save the drones that now bzzzd to and fro occasionally above the treetops. They were one of few familiarities in this new setting, actually. Henry had never been in a forest. He'd experienced simulations in school, but he'd never walked through or seen a real one. Whatever forests had once existed on the West Coast where he'd grown up had burned down in the endless fires ages ago. Where he'd

grown up was nowhere near as beautiful as where he found himself now.

Henry took a deep, appreciative breath. The air was clean. Clear. The citrus-pungency of pine mixed with the dry loam of the spring forest floor in bittersweet unison. It was nothing like the smog of home. The wildfires out west were near constant now, and it was rare to have a day when the air wasn't hazy and bitter. But here, the air was light. Sweet. And Henry realized he was smiling dumbly as he appreciated it, probably looking rather odd to the fellow in front of him if he were to turn and notice. The shorter guy had fallen back into the reserved silence that seemed to be his default state, his posture. perfect, his thin shoulders held tight—evidently fixated on the ground as he hiked on.

“Are you from here, then?” Henry inquired uncomfortably, wanting to fill the void between them as they huffed up a steep incline in the trail. The forest ahead opened into a clearing. They'd gone about a mile from the village where the Gobi air-tai had set him down.

“Born and raised,” Simon replied. His voice was deeper than Henry might have expected for a guy his size, his voice mature and even. “My parents own the inn and restaurant in town; you should stop by sometime.” The trail had narrowed, and Henry—amazing himself after all he'd just been through—realized he was rather distracted by the shorter man's small, muscular ass, his tight grey sweatpants clinging to the plump little cheeks within as he climbed...

Henry tripped on a root, slamming face-first into the ground and cutting his forehead painfully on a rock. When he withdrew his hand from the wound, it was red with blood. The cut wasn't deep, but it was already making a mess of his

work uniform, dribbling across it messily, staining the pale grey with crimson.

“Hey, are you ok?!” Simon knelt down near him, oddly maternal in the way he immediately held the side of Henry’s head and gently brushed back his blood-soaked hair from the cut so delicately with his calloused hand. Simon’s face was instantly rigid with concern as he bit his lip, seemingly no longer able to be flustered now that someone needed him. “It will bleed a bit, but thankfully, I don’t think you need to visit the clinic. Let’s get you to the house and see if there’s anything in there we can use to clean you up.” Simon offered reassuringly, helping Henry to his feet, barely able to shoulder his huge weight as he rose from the needles.

Henry nodded, a bit dazed but imagining himself to be relatively okay. The blood was trickling down his face, into his eye, and he instinctively peeled off his already-blood-stained work shirt before balling it up and holding it tight against his forehead, never intending to wear the damned thing again anyway.

“I’m fine,” Henry said, smiling weakly, hoping he didn’t look totally unhinged. But he realized then, with embarrassment, that the shorter, older guy was staring incredulously at his admittedly enhanced physique; Simon seemed dumbstruck at what he was looking at. Henry felt instantly self-conscious as he often did when this happened, not wanting to seem as though he’d been showing off, not liking the attention the unwanted changes that had been made to his body always drew. Henry quickly unzipped his duffel, hurriedly grabbing one of the shirts he’d folded neatly inside and putting it on.

His mother had volunteered to have her pregnancy and delivery, along with his first year of diapers, paid for in their entirety when she enrolled in a study on stem-cell research Gobi had been conducting. They alleged that they were trying to boost immunity against certain genetic disorders. What they'd actually done was reach inside of him and play god with his entire genome—turning him into a freak in more ways than just this too-pumped-up body.

Henry had always known he was different. He'd always been big—huge, actually—and by the time he'd reached high school, he still hadn't stopped growing. By college, he had become, in his own eyes, a true monster. But at last, to his profound relief, the growing had eventually slowed down and come to a stop.

Although by the time it finally happened, to his great horror, his genitals had gotten the final and irrevocable dose of whatever they'd done to him, finally taking their turn in whatever all this had been. Over some few months, his freshman year of college, had swollen into obscenity, growing so large he feared if it continued, the colossal thing might never fit in another hole.

He had refused to measure himself as it happened, terrified of knowing his own freakish numbers in any specificity, but he knew he'd never seen anything remotely like what he'd become in his entire life. And People had exactly two reactions to him: they were afraid of him, or they wanted to fuck him. Or both. Nearly no one had been up to the task, man or woman, and Henry had yet to allow himself to indulge the insatiable lust that came along with his boosted manhood. He had been nearly 3 or 4 times the size of Hugo,

and he'd be lying if he hadn't enjoyed that just a little by the end.

Goji had also given him other enhancements, but he had rarely occasioned to share them with anyone save Hugo, who never seemed willing to acknowledge them directly, blatantly envious of Henry's flawless and effortless form. He didn't blame him; he hadn't earned it after all. He didn't even *want* it. Gobi had forced him against his will into uncomfortable moments like the one pooling between himself and Simon now, all his life.

The black t-shirt fit snugly against his broad chest, and he was aware it did little to hide his bulging pectorals or the enormous nipples that graced each of them, finding clothes that did was impossible, but he wished anyway that he had something else to put on as Simon gaped at him openly, face a deep scarlet. Henry hadn't even realized he was gay before now. He didn't blame him; he was all too aware of how he appeared.

"Sorry. Bad habit," Henry apologized shyly, the guys' jaws still hanging open at what he'd just seen. But both of their attention was redirected then as Beans growled at a noise coming from the dense brush on one side of the trail—a twig snapping here and a rustling of leaves there, the only sounds aside from their voices to interrupt the filtered green light of the trail for some time.

"Let's get going," Simon urged nervously, glancing from side to side as though they might not be alone. Finally, he regained his composure, his pale face ashen.

"Is there something you're not telling me?" Henry asked nervously. The two had finally passed out of the woods at a

clipped pace and entered a vast meadow, overgrown with brambles and weeds, with not a single trace of evidence in sight that it had ever produced more than just that.

“Lots, probably,” Simon dodged playfully, evidently thankful to distract himself from whatever those sounds had been. “And here’s the house.” He announced, “*Your* house, I suppose.” He added, as though he couldn’t fully commit to believing it either.

The home was an A-frame chalet, the sole building in the field save a large metal barn that likely housed whatever equipment the farm had once relied on. By now, it would have aged into obsolescence. The place was covered in solar panels, which had fallen out of favor some decades prior during the Cobalt Wars that had been merely a precursor to the horrors of the current one.

“Doesn’t look like much now,” Simon continued beside him as they climbed the few short steps to the home’s singular door, “but when I was 5 or 6, the last year your grandfather was alive, he grew so many pumpkins here that we ended up eating the frozen things for years after he passed. If I’m honest, I’ve hated pumpkins ever since. But don’t tell my mother that, there’s probably still some of that soup down in the freezer at The Silver to this very day.” He laughed gruffly, as though recalling a fond memory of a time long ago, and Henry didn’t know if he felt a bit of envy or not that Simon had gotten to know his grandfather while he himself had not—instead growing up in the urban decay of the city, familyless, not a tree in sight.

But Henry tried, as he always had, not to dwell on that. He couldn’t change the past, and after all—this was all somehow miraculously *his* now. Paid in full. Almost no one

owned their own homes anymore; most rented from Gobi or other such corporations or cohabitated in government housing blocks or communes, living off basic universal income, forced to eat nothing but the bland subsistence rations the company had lobbied for exclusive rights to provision at what it assured was an at-cost discount. If Henry had been responsible for those accounts, he would have likely been forced to blow that particular whistle as well.

It wasn't a huge home by any means, but the design was crisp and past for what was considered "modern" thirty or so years prior— vast glass panes of glass, concrete, and steel, all that adorned the inviting but minimalistic space. There wasn't even much furniture within—the bottom floor was just a single big room that possessed a real leather sofa, a wooden dining table, a few chairs, and a small but efficient kitchenette along one wall. A spiral staircase to one side leading up to a loft he assumed housed the home's bathroom and sleeping area. Beans had already taken off to explore whatever might be up there, winding up and up the stairs and disappearing from sight, the sound of him scampering around bringing a smile to Henry's face.

"Hang on, let me activate the solar panels on the roof and prime the well. All the homes in Moondrop are totally self-sufficient, but this one has been dormant for a long time—let me see if I can wake it up." Simon offered, seemingly more capable than Henry had maybe given him credit for, given how flustered he had gotten at the mere sight of him. He wondered briefly what he would do if he were to see the rest of him...

...But his thoughts had wandered inadvertently onto the landmine of Hugo somehow. And he wondered—even though he didn't want to—if the man cared at all about where Henry might be. Henry knew full well he likely couldn't even afford to get back to the West Coast even if he wanted to. Long-distance travel was a luxury he'd never been able to afford; most couldn't, and he was all too aware that on top of everything else, he had negative dollars in his bank account at present and no means of making money. He pulled his phone out of his pocket to anxiously check if Hugo had texted, hating himself for indulging in the insecurity...

“Those won't work here. They never have. It's part of why the founder picked this place.” Simon said bluntly from the door he'd just returned through, flipping a switch on the wall experimentally and satisfying himself when a series of well-hidden lights came to life within the home, the sound of a furnace somewhere starting as the air within began to clear of must almost immediately, some advanced filtration system already getting to work.

“Told you these places were built to last.” He winked.

“Fancy,” Henry said, awestruck as he took it all in. The walls on either end of the A-frame were enormous panes of glass, and as the lights had come on, he'd realized just how stunning the view out across the field was—the impossibly tall peaks of the Rocky Mountains grasping up into the sky, the forest dense and deep and healthy at their base. It was like a world from another time—and he truly couldn't believe it existed.

“State of the art. Or, *was*. But most of it has been maintained decently; I think you'll find the house in good

working order—although I'd recommend washing the sheets and towels if I were you. We have mice here." Simon said, grinning self-consciously at the admission as though he had something to do with the local rodent population.

Henry did flinch at the mention of mice, though. He hated messes. As he looked around, he realized that the dry and well-serviced home was somewhat filthy, and he instantly felt himself prickle at the realization that *this* was where he'd be living from now on. He knew the first thing he would do when Simon left was set to work: bring order to the chaos and locate whatever tools were available to wipe away the grime that had settled here, starting with the mouse droppings he'd just spotted on the kitchen counter.

"Sorry nobody ever bothered to clean the place after he passed—he was a big part of The Vale, though. People loved him, and the food he grew here fed almost two entire generations of the town. It'll be great if you can get the farm up and running again, although..." He drifted off thoughtfully for a moment before continuing, "I'm pretty sure all the agri-drones he used are out of commission. The things were old before I was born, and no one has been able to afford much more than the basics, let alone a *drone*, for as long as I can remember; otherwise, we would have just managed the place ourselves..." Simon sounded whistful as though remembering the edge of a faint dream, a time of plenty.

"Anyway," he finished, "I hope you know how to grow food. My guess is unless you're rich, it will have to be the old-fashioned way." Simon shrugged his shoulders, making to leave as though he had no more help to offer. Henry had already been constructing a mental hierarchy of which chores would happen in what order, starting at the top and

working his way down until the entire place sparkled. He'd think about farming and whatever the fuck else he'd have to do in order to survive later. The man had his priorities. But he found himself appreciating the surprisingly generous stranger, despite being ever on the lookout for what someone might be looking to extract from him under the pretense of kindness.

"Thanks for helping me..." he said, his voice faltering a bit over the vulnerability of his words "...with finding Beans and for showing me to this place. I appreciate it," he admitted to the stranger, meaning it but not sure he'd done the feeling justice.

"It's what we do here in The Vale. Remember what I told you about the woods. And check out The Silver if you're feeling hungry; my mom's a great cook, she makes Gobi's frozen junk taste almost homemade. Tell her Simon sent you and she'll hook you up." He had paused briefly on the porch, and Henry couldn't help but find the shorter man rather cute as he stood there, his face and comportment so consternated and dutiful.

Simon's overly serious demeanor made the giggles Beans had caused to erupt from him earlier all the more endearing. Henry felt a colossal twitch in his pants at the memory, his cock deciding it had somehow already moved on from Hugo well before Henry had even processed the loss, threatening to reveal itself like a surfacing submarine if it even got the slightest bit erect.

"I'll do that," Henry said hurriedly, lifting up Beans, who had joined him at the doorway and waving his little arm at Simon in farewell, relieved to find his manhood behaving itself for now.

“You’re lucky the dog is cute.” Simon grinned, shaking his head as he jogged down the steps and walked briskly into the woods. He glanced once at the A-frame before he disappeared, seemingly embarrassed to find Henry still watching him. Simon whipped his head forward and quickened his jaunt out of the meadow.

What Henry couldn’t help but notice was the way his head darted from side to side as he approached the wall of trees, as though scanning the forest boundary for threats, and he suddenly felt he really needed to ask someone directly about what all that was about. But for now, he was going to clean. And so he began.

AND IT TURNED out that was a fortuitous decision. Upstairs, there was very little in the way of possessions. Aside from a little walled-off area in the otherwise open loft that contained a composting toilet, a shower that used solar-heated reclaimed water for bathing, and an all-in-one washer-dryer with a decades-old box of wash powder on top, there was little else. The detergent smelled soapy and inoffensive enough to him that he decided to put it to work immediately, doing as Simon had suggested, and started washing the sheets and towels.

A giant king-sized bed resided in the open space, its foam mattress still incredibly comfortable when he tested it. The only other piece of furniture was a desk perched overlooking the floor below on one end of the space, and it was instantly curious to him as the antique looked much older than any of the other furniture, the style not quite matching. When he sat at it, drawn to its intricate walnut grain, he

couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt at his inadvertent voyeurism, at the bizarre way his life had unfolded into this moment.

As he sat there looking around at what he supposed was now his, Beans pacing about and acclimating himself, Henry's curiosity eventually got the better of him as it often did—and he began rummaging idly through the desk's various drawers. Some contained office supplies of different types; one was even humorously filled with old-fashioned candy bars—apparently the old man's secret stash—from way back when such things hadn't been banned due to rationing. Henry had almost been tempted to try one before reading the expiration date and relieving himself of the fact that he hadn't.

In the final drawer, to his surprise, he found a note addressed to him, alongside the most money he had ever seen in one place, stacked neatly and filling the big drawer nearly entirely. It had somehow gone untouched by the community all these years—evidently, Moondrop Vale didn't experience constant looting and vandalism like he'd experienced growing up in the ruins of a formerly bustling metropolis.

The note provided little if any explanation for Henry's current situation, and almost appeared to be an afterthought:

To whatever Heir might arise to inherit this place after my passing: do whatever the hell you want with it—just don't spend my money at fucking Gobi. Grandpa.

It hadn't been the sentimental missive illuminating his family heritage that Henry had maybe hoped to find. Still,

he set the note aside carefully nonetheless before beginning to count the money, realizing quickly that he might have enough to pay off all of his debts and then some...

CLEANING the house had taken many hours, and the sun had dipped low in the sky by the time he'd restored the place to a standard he felt he could live with for now, constantly re wiping this or that surface, forever waging his neverending battle against entropy. And at some point, he realized that he was fucking starving.

“What do you think, Beans? You want to walk into town and get some dinner?” Henry asked the dog, who merely looked at him with a cocked head, always ready for anything. Henry grinned, finally somewhat relaxed, and grabbed a stack of cash before harnessing the dog up and allowing himself a quick moment to admire the space—his space—and realizing he hadn't quite let it sink in that he finally had a home after all these years he'd gone without. It didn't feel like his home, not just yet, but he was starting to accept that, at least intellectually and legally, it actually was. He gently flipped off the lights and stepped out into the cool twilight.

The walk into town was largely uneventful. Henry wasn't even sure exactly what he was supposed to keep an eye out for—Simon had never clarified. But he did find himself peering into the dark spaces between the trees more often than he wanted to, even convincing himself at one point that he'd heard something rustling alongside him. When he'd stopped to listen, though, so had the sound.

At last, he could finally make out the first of the town square's lampposts, casting a welcoming light up ahead that he hurried toward, looking once over his shoulder as he finally reached town. Across the cobbled square, The Silver Moon Inn and Tavern beckoned him, his stomach growling at the thought of food. After all, the last calories he'd consumed had come from the synth wine.