

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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Chapter X

Through a blinding, white fog, Dodger swore he could see someone standing before him. Unable to focus his eyes, he couldn't be sure who it was. Karol? No, the figure was much too tall. Rauno? No, the figure was strangely slender. Dodger reached out, trying to speak, but no words came from his mouth. There was no air in his lungs. He couldn't breathe. It must have been the fog. No, it wasn't a fog. The entire room around him was blinding white, utterly devoid of detail and form. Who was there in that room, looking down at him? The figure took one long, labored step toward Dodger, almost coming into focus.

Dodger opened his eyes with weary strain. Above him, he saw the familiar timber ceiling of his bedroom. The scent of cinnamon and freshly burned firewood gently brushed against his face and brought him to his senses. The delicate, morning light had already found its way down to the other end of the hallway outside the bedroom door. All that weirdness had just been a bizarre dream. He had imagined it all up in a world of subconscious imagination. None of it had actually happened. Dodger turned over on his side to see Samba's bed, empty except for the tired, gray fur left behind by an old Golden Retriever. Dodger stretched his arm over to feel for Karol but found his arm pinned down. His jacket had gotten twisted around in his sleep. He wasn't wearing the moose pajamas Karol got for him. No, he was still fully dressed. He wore his khaki carpenter pants and camouflage hunting jacket. What

kind of wild night did he have? Dodger's head swirled as he sat himself up, recollecting the events of the night before. Wirriam had bought a bunch of shots for everyone at the bar. He must have just had way too much Honey Thunder. Dodger licked his lips as his throat grinded against itself like sandpaper rolled up into a tube. He must not have had any water while he was drinking the night before. He swore he'd never make that mistake again since the night of Stormy's party more than fifteen years ago. As Dodger stood up, he stumbled and caught himself by setting his left hand on the bedroom dresser. On his left hand were paper towels hastily applied with scattered strips of duct tape. He looked down to see dried blood on his jacket and pants. No, it wasn't a dream after all. He could only have wished.

Dodger carefully removed the makeshift bandage from his hand to find the skin below his knuckles seemingly sliced with a sheer blade. As he took a freezing cold shower, he kept opening and closing his palm to ensure he still had full range of motion of his fingers. He only felt a distant, dull pain, as if he had experienced the exact same injury sometime in the past. The icy water probably helped in easing the pain but the cold certainly wasn't welcome in any other way as it pelted Dodger with what felt like tiny shards of ice cubes. Dodger waited for hot water that would never come. Of course. The house still had no electricity.

This was it. This was the last straw. No more sitting in the dark. No more stumbling blindly through the house, drunk at 3am. No more waiting for Karol to come home before getting things in order. Dodger shaved his newly grown beard as he stared at the mirror into the eyes of a man who looked much older and more tired than he expected. His arms looked

thinner and his gut stuck out much farther than he remembered seeing the last time he took a real look in the mirror. He dressed himself in the last newly washed, fresh pair of clothes in his dresser and scrubbed the blood from his jacket as he drank a cup of Ritmo coffee. No more messing around. It was time to get things done. First things first, he was going to get electrical parts from Rendlesham Hardware and finally fix the electricity in the house. As he reached the front door, the thought of his truck flashed into his mind. He didn't drive himself home the night before. No one in town ever drove home after getting drunk. Everyone respected Sheriff Moss far too much to do that and perhaps they were a bit scared of him as well. Dodger would have to walk to the bar to pick up his truck. That was no big deal. The bar wasn't that far down the street anyway. Dodger opened the front door and took one step out in the crisp, misty morning air, only to see the golden glow of the rising sun shining off the windshield of his truck. How did the truck get back from the bar?

Dodger patted down his pockets and checked his belt loop to find he didn't have his keys. He turned back around to realize the kitchen had been neatly cleaned and returned to order. The chairs had been set back in place, the weeks old dead flowers from the vase had been thrown out, and his set of keys rested on the table in plain sight. Who cleaned up the kitchen and brought his truck back? No, he didn't have time think about it. He had work to do.

He jumped in his truck and drove down to the hardware store even before the heater could get warmed up. Like a heat seeking missile, he tracked down the electrical parts he needed, striding past the three hundred and ninety

nine dollar “Marsh Stalker” multi tool without even a peripheral glance. He finally took a breath when he stepped up to the cashier and was met by a tired looking yet welcoming smile. A dreamy-eyed lady in her mid 20’s, with short braided black hair and a unicorn badge on her work hat greeted Dodger. Rainbow earrings, strawberry lipstick, and shimmering, prism colored eye shadow accentuated her dark skin. Her defiantly cheerful expression only just barely failed to mask some painful past that somehow continued to linger at the back of her mind.

“Mornin, Dodger. How are ya doin’ today, hon?” Dee Starboard yawned before taking a sip of the store’s instant coffee.

“Hey, good morning, Dee. How are things going with your dad’s new boat?” Dodger smiled back, setting his items on the counter.

“We just got it all sanded back and ready for the first coat of primer. Well, I could have started the primer yesterday but you know what my dad is like! He wanted to inspect every last inch before we start priming. I was all, you know, I ain’t no summer child no more. You knooow I’ve sanded down and painted dozens of these things before, but you know what a perfectionist he is and holy shit! Dodger, what happened to your hand!?” Dee stepped back with a jump as a drop of blood fell from Dodger’s hand onto the counter.

“Oh, I uh... caught it on a fence or something last night,” Dodger muttered, looking down to realize the cut was deeper than it looked.

“Look, hon, I’d give you some paper towels I got here but lord knows these things aren’t hygienic, covered in grease and sawdust and all that. You heading to the doctor’s office after you leave here?” Dee said apprehensively, quickly bagging Dodger’s items.

“Yeah, sure, of course,” Dodger mumbled.

“Hmm, hon, I ain’t gonna put these items through until you promise me will march your sweet little self over to see Dr. Allerdyce immediately. Like I mean right now.” Dee commanded, her eyes heating up Dodger like stadium spotlights focused through a furrowed scowl.

“Okay, alright, I promise,” he said, suddenly startled into reality. He carefully picked up the brown paper bag holding his items, wondering if Dee would snatch them back from him.

“I know how you old guys think you’re all so tough. You let that get infected and go gangrenous and you’ll feel tough when they have to amputate that and you gotta play pool with a hook hand,” Dee scolded Dodger from out the side of her mouth. Her fiery tone singed the edges of Dodger’s baseball cap.

“I got it. I promise. I’ll go see Dr. Allerdyce. Right now,” he smiled back.

“Okay, good. You forgot your moon pie so I put one in your bag for you. Alright, love you, hon. You take care of yourself and tell Karol I said hello too!” Dee beamed as she set her hands on the counter and leaned forward, tilting her head with a warming smile. The various unicorn badges on her

wood-working apron and her earrings glistened with a prismatic light.

Dodger got back into his truck, holding his left hand up to avoid getting his blood on anything. He pulled the “Man On the Moon” pie out of the bag and threw it onto the passenger seat. It landed next to the previous day’s uneaten, still-wrapped moon pie which had been flattened at some point when Karn had gotten into the truck. Dodger took a short drive to the doctor’s office while trying to clear the echo of Dee’s words from his mind. What did Dee mean by “old” anyway?

He parked in front of the Sheriff’s station, which shared the same breathing space as the doctor’s office and the Chunky Chicken restaurant. He looked across the street to see that Rauno’s truck was no longer parked in front of the bar. Rauno must have driven himself back to his motel room the night before. As Dodger stepped out of his truck, he peered in through the front window of the Sheriff’s Office and saw Sheriff Moss looking down at some papers. Perfect. Dodger could step right in there and report what had happened the night before. He could tell Moss of people mysteriously disappearing and about the cougar that nearly killed him. With some brazen wind blowing at his back, Dodger marched on up the old wooden steps and stepped into the Sheriff’s office.

The warm fragrance of coffee and freshly baked cookies instantly eased the tension in Dodger’s shoulders and clenched fists. The grand, framed painting of a romanticized wild-west landscape hanging on the back wall always caught Dodger’s eye. He remembered when Sheriff Fred had put that

painting in years ago. Dodger reoriented himself, looking past the locked filing cabinets in the corner of the room, the antiquated yet somehow still functioning radio system, the outdated computers, and beautiful hand crafted wooden desks. Instead of finding Moss stony faced, filing down a stack of paperwork with an iron first, Dodger stood in awe to see Moss chuckling with a smile he hadn't seen since Moss was still a kid. Standing in front of Moss' desk was a figure whose silhouette had been cast by the easy morning light. There before Dodger were the words, "Keep Yourself Alive" emblazoned on a hand-made leather jacket.

"Anyway, I saw that comic in today's paper and thought you'd get a laugh out of it," Holt chuckled before taking a step back.

"Aw, man, that was a good one! Yeah, I guess she was a fish after all! Hahaha! Who comes up with this stuff?" Moss openly laughed, lightly slapping the table. The sun poured in behind him over his shoulders with a glow that left Dodger stunned.

"Well, gotta run. I'm gonna help Sam split wood today. He acted like he was fine doing it himself but he clearly pulled a muscle the other day. Anyway, I'm grabbing one of these cookies, alright?" Holt said as he quickly stepped over to the corner of the room where the coffee maker and a big plate of cookies sat on a table. "Oh, hi there, Dodger. Good to see ya again. Have a good day," Holt nodded.

"Have fun with that. I'll catch you later on, buddy," Moss waved, still chuckling, as Holt walked out of the building.

What in the hell just happened? Someone had come in to see Moss to just casually show him a funny comic in a newspaper? No one in town would ever have the guts to waste Moss' time like that. Everyone knew what a tight ship Moss ran and how strict he was with his work hours. It was clear there was to be no socializing or time wasting during work. Not only that, but Holt just waltzed in there and took one of Moss' cookies before even asking? And Moss just called someone "buddy"? Has the world turned upside? Do cats and fish kiss each other now? What is even the difference between up and down anymore?

"Good morning, Dodger! Good to see you. What can I do for you?" Moss said with a grin. Dodger was utterly stunned. He couldn't remember the last time he saw Moss laugh like that, much less look so relaxed. How could Dodger even dare to ruin Moss' mood by telling him about what happened with the cougar. How could he possibly dare to ask what Moss was doing with Bull the night before? Maybe he should make up an excuse. He could tell Moss he's checking to see if the building has been having electrical problems. Maybe he should say he came in just to say hello. No, that didn't seem like the right thing to do.

"You know, I just forgot what I was going to ask," Dodger laughed at himself. "I guess that happens when you get old."

"Go easy on yourself, man. You're not nearly old yet," Moss smiled back reassuringly.

"Haha, guess you're right. It wasn't important though. I was just on the way to see Sparro," Dodger took a deep

breath, catching a whiff of the freshly baked pastries in the room.

“Stop by if you remember what you wanted to ask. Or just say hi sometime,” Moss nodded as he leaned back in his seat.

“Hey, uh... Those cookies smell really good. Could I have one?” Dodger asked sheepishly, hiding behind the bill of his cap.

“Yeah, man! Of course! Go for it. Food’s made to be eaten,” Moss laughed. Who was this jovial man and where was the real Sheriff Moss? Maybe Nickelas was right. Maybe aliens had abducted Moss and modified his brain or something. Whatever had caused this change, all of Dodger’s apprehensions crumbled away as he chomped down onto a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie that melted in his mouth. Somehow, it was even better than the usual ones Moss made for the annual Winter Cookiefest Baking Festival. Dodger thanked Moss. They shook hands before Dodger left and took a few steps over to the doctor’s office. His head was still spinning from trying to understand what had just happened.

As Dodger entered the doctor’s office, the smell of a plastic potted plant and cleaning chemicals slapped him right in the face. The pale, cold lights above caused him to flinch as he walked down the hall toward the receptionist’s desk. Hanging on the walls were bizarre, new age, overly colorful art that depicted ducks and moose in strange positions. Dodger was never a fan of those hanging photos and often wondered who even chose to put those on the walls.

An exhausted looking middle aged woman with light brown hair and sleep deprived eyes looked up at Dodger from behind thick framed glasses.

“I’m here to see Dr. Allerdyce. I uh... cut my hand,” Dodger held up his hand and pointed to his injury as if it helped explain the situation. From somewhere behind him, the sound of a drop of water hitting a metal bucket caught his attention.

“Ouch, that looks like a real boo-boo, for sure. He doesn’t have any appointments today. Just go ahead and walk right in,” the receptionist pointed to a door next to a strangely abstract painting that looked like an upside down forest with a cone of light shining through the middle of it.

Dodger opened the old wooden door while knocking. He slowly inched his way into the room as a voice creaked out, “Who is it?” Scattered around the room were various duffle bags. An expensive looking, seemingly brand new hiking backpack sat on the examination table, surrounded by all kinds of unused camping equipment still sealed in packaging. Knives, fire starters, first aid supplies, bear spray, flashlights, and batteries were scattered all around the office. A rigid, angular figure sat at the doctor’s desk with his back to Dodger. His face housed a storm of conflict and indecision behind a neutral, unreadable façade, yet his eyes seemed to ever carry the weight of decades of regret. His thick mustache seemed grown specifically to filter his worlds and distill them into only the most direct and necessary of messages.

Sparro Allerdyce turned his seat around while he rolled down his right sleeve to conceal some sort of bandage that he

had just finished applying to his forearm. He peered over his glasses to examine the look on Dodger's face before speaking.

"Good morning, Dodger. How are you this morning?" Sparro stood up and extended his right hand out for a handshake.

"I'm good, Doc. Good to see ya. I think I might need some stitches," Dodger said, shaking Sparro's hand as gently as he could. Despite that, Sparro flinched, unable to hide some degree of pain.

"That's a nasty looking cut. What did you do to your hand?" Sparro picked up Dodger's left hand and gave it a close look. Dodger took the opportunity to peek over Sparro's shoulder to notice some kind of topographical map on the desk. A bright red circle drawn on the map indicated some location of importance. Before Dodger could discern any details, Sparro looked up to meet Dodger's eyes.

"I, uh... cut my arm on a fence last night," Dodger mumbled, struggling to wear his poker face. Whatever happened the night before had left Dodger sluggish. He pointed to Sparro favoring his right arm and said, "What happened there? What did *you* do to *your* arm?" The two men stared at each other, locked in a tense, electric gaze. Dodger could see the gears turning behind Sparro's eyes.

"I cut my arm last night too. Fences are sharp around these parts," Sparro stated plainly, turning away to shuffle through his drawers. Dodger could see Sparro glaring back at him from the corner of his eye. "Luckily your cut isn't too deep. I'll clean it and give you a couple stitches. Are you fine

with that?" Sparro lead Dodger toward the exam table, away from the map on the desk.

"Just don't go makin' me cry, Doc," Dodger winced as Sparro poured a dark liquid over Dodger's hand.

"You wouldn't be the first cute girl who's said that to me," Sparro chuckled, nudging Dodger with his elbow. Dodger couldn't help but laugh as Sparro stuck him with a needle.

"Hey, so, what's with all the camping gear?" Dodger asked through gritted teeth. "You never struck me as the outdoors type."

"What, this stuff? Oh... it's not for me. It's for a friend. I just picked this stuff up as a favor," Sparro answered as his eyes dodged left and right. He seemed to be stitching Dodger's hand entirely through his peripheral vision.

"Who's it for? Anyone I know?" Dodger asked casually. Sparro sharply tugged at the thread weaving through Dodger's cut, eliciting a yelp of surprise and pain.

"Hey, come on. Hold still. I'm not nearly done yet," Sparro focused on Dodger's hand as if trying to speed through the process.

"I haven't been camping in a while. If you guys wanted a third wheel, maybe I could join in," Dodger stared at Sparro's chest pocket, imaging some piece of paper with Bull's handwriting in there.

"What about Bear? Why don't you go camping with him?" Sparro asked, pulling on Dodger's cut again.

“I had a talk with Arnalt Weiss in the bar the other night. Bear saw me and he’s been pissed off with me since then. I don’t know if he’s told Patriona and I’m scared to even ask,” Dodger gritted his teeth as his eyes watered.

“They’re still holding a grudge over that, huh? It’s a shame what Arnalt did to Sarah but people grow and change. Sarah doesn’t even live here anymore so there’s no point for Bear and Patriona to drag things out like that,” Sparro flung out a small pair of scissors and clipped the thread with a single, fluid motion. Dodger looked down to see the stitched cut formed the shape of an X with the old scar that was already on the back of his hand.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to track down Hunter Falke to ask him something. Was he at the outdoors shop yesterday?” Dodger casually asked, sounding only vaguely interested.

“What? Yesterday? Well, he was there this morning if you wanted to catch him,” Sparro answered as he applied a bandage to cover the stitched cut on Dodger’s hand, totally unaware of the information he had just revealed.

“Thanks for all the help, Doc,” Dodger hid his grin as he reached up to brush his moustache. “I sure do appreciate it. You got such soft, pretty hands.”

“Hey! Watch it, buster!” Sparro pointed up at Dodger with a fake scowl and laughed. Dodger stepped back toward the exit as both men each pulled their hand of cards closer to their chests. As Dodger craned his neck to get another look at the map on the desk, Sparro stepped forward to break Dodger’s line of site.

“You, uh... take care of yourself, Sparro. And pay closer attention to those sharp fences,” Dodger said as he stepped out of the room.

“Yeah... you too,” Sparro answered as he slowly tucked some camping gear into a backpack, watching Dodger leave through the corner of his eye.

Dodger stepped back out into the chilly morning air to be greeted by a familiar face fraught with fear. Fort stood next to Dodger’s truck, scratching his arm nervously.

“Hey, Fort. What’s up, partner?” Dodger opened the already unlocked driver door of his truck.

“Hey Dodger, are you guys alright? Did anything happen last night?” Fort asked, staring down at Dodger’s bandaged hand. “Whoa, dude! What happened!? Are you alright?”

“Nothing. Nothing happened,” Dodger shrugged, failing to wear his poker face.

“Then what happened to your hand?” Fort’s eyes went wide, conjuring all sorts of horrors in his mind.

“I’m a bit busy today. Got a lot of things to take care of,” Dodger said under his breath, looking around to see if anyone was within earshot.

“I need to talk to you about something important. Can we go somewhere quiet?” Fort whispered.

“Hop in. Let’s get breakfast at The Frying Saucer,” Dodger answered, knowing there was no other option than to

hear what Fort had to say. After a quiet, uncomfortable ride where nothing was said, Dodger parked in front of the shiny, chrome accented diner with the giant saucer sign up top. The smell of fresh pancakes, butter, and hot maple syrup brought a strange sort of comfort to Dodger as he his boots squeaked against the freshly mopped checkerboard tile floor. Seated at the far end of the front counter was an older couple dressed in rugged outdoor gear. Seated on the couch by the fireplace was a bright eyed young man in his early 20s with jet black untamed hair and a hooded sweater that read "Mercury". Sitting next to him was another young man in his late teens with blacked out glasses. At his side patiently sat a handsome young Golden Retriever wearing a harness that read "Service Dog". Dodger smiled to himself, thinking back to when Samba was around that dog's age. Sitting in the booth nearest the entrance was a middle aged with an exhausted, long drawn face and red, heavy eyes. As Dodger walked past, he paused and set his hand on the man's shoulder.

"Hey Gilber. How are you? Any news on your son?" Dodger asked quietly.

"Still just the coma. Nothing new," the man's hoarse voice creaked as he stared deep into his coffee.

Dodger walked to the far corner of the diner, as far as he could get from the other patrons, finding the same booth he had sat at with Karn the day before. Fort sat down across from Dodger, looking over his shoulder before plopping two mangled pieces of plastic down onto the table with a surprisingly heavy slam.

“What are those?” Dodger asked, scratching his cheek to make sure he had totally shaved his newly grown beard.

“These are my memory cards. They were just fine yesterday before we watched that video in your house,” Fort leaned forward, adjusting and lining up his memory cards nervously. “Look, they’re toast. Totally melted.”

“What did you go and melt them for?” Dodger poked at one of the cards to inspect it.

“I didn’t. They were like that by the time I got home last night. Do you still have your memory card? You know... the one with the video I recovered?” Fort looked up with a sleep deprived, frantic expression.

“Well sure, it’s right here,” Dodger pulled his memory card out of his jacket pocket and lightly set it down on the table. To his shock, his card was even more melted and mangled as Fort’s own two cards. “I... uh...”

“What do you think happened? What melted our memory cards?” Fort’s whisper grew to a frustrated grunt.

“No idea,” Dodger looked away, watching his reflection in the glistening glass of the salt shaker on the table.

“Did you guys go to Bull’s property last night? What happened there?” Fort slapped his hands down, his brows tensed with fear.

“We didn’t get far. We got attacked by a cougar-” Dodger started but was cut off by Fort.

“Holy shit! You fought a cougar!?” Fort’s voice escaped with an excited shout.

“I’m trying to tell you what happened. It jumped on me. There was some bright flash of light. Some kind of explosion, I don’t know what it was. I blacked out as soon as it happened. My head still hurts a bit,” Dodger looked up to the ceiling, searching his memory like sifting through a filing cabinet.

“What? Like dynamite?” Fort lowered his voice again, looking around the diner to see if anyone was eavesdropping.

“It was more like a bolt of lightning I guess. It was weird. The last thing I remember I was holding...” Dodger checked his jacket pocket to find it empty. The Starglass Karn had given him was nowhere to be found. Dodger patted down his other pockets to find the Starglass nowhere in sight. “Shit. Karn’s gonna be disappointed when he finds out I lost it.”

“Lost what?” Fort asked, picking up and glancing at the menu.

“Nothing. It was nothing,” Dodger sighed. As footsteps approached, Dodger and Fort grabbed their melted memory cards and tucked them away. They were greeted by a waitress in her mid 20s with cherry brown hair, rosy cheeks, and an innocent, cheerful look on her face. Her horseshoe earrings glistened with the honey colored light from the early morning sun. On her face, she proudly wore a soft, unbreakable expression of kindness despite years of kids at school bullying her because of her weight.

“Good morning, fellas! What can I get ya?” Bjorna Hancock gave a playful wave as she flipped up a page on her pocket notebook.

“Hey there, Bjorna. How are ya? Any news about your cousin?” Dodger turned to face Bjorna as if trying to keep the conversation a secret from Fort.

“No news is good news, right?” Bjorna shrugged. For a brief moment, her smile cracked, revealing a frightened, exhausted expression hiding just below the surface.

“Falcon’s not in, is he?” Dodger asked apprehensively, already knowing the answer to his question. Bjorna gritted her teeth as she nervously chuckled. For a moment, she was frozen like a deer caught in headlights.

“He didn’t show up again. Nickelas is covering the morning shift,” Borna explained, looking over her shoulder.

“Oh,” Dodger’s shoulders drooped.

“So you won’t be having an omelette then, will you?” Bjorna subtly giggled. “How about a nice chicken fried steak?”

“I think my stomach might not be up for something that heavy. I had a bit of a rough night,” Dodger said, looking up at her with his bleary eyes.

“Ohhh, I gotcha. How about something lighter, then? My uncle Iron always says the best thing for a hangover is some nice country biscuits with sausage gravy. He’s never puked not even once when having that for breakfast after a night of drinks,” Bjorna chirped like a bird greeting the morning sun.

“Yikes. That wasn’t the ringing endorsement I expected,” Fort went wide eyed, setting down the menu as his gag reflex nearly activated.

“Alright, I’ll take the recommendation,” Dodger leaned back in his seat and gave the waitress a smile.

“Okay, one meal sized serving of biscuits and gravy. And what will your son be having today?”

“That’s not my dad.” “He’s not my son.” Fort and Dodger spoke out simultaneously, their voices ringing in unison.

“My mistake. It just looked that way,” Bjorna squinted out into the distance to figure out what she had gotten wrong.

“I’ll uh... have the Big Boy Breakfast,” Fort said, lowering the pitch of his voice, trying to sound tough.

“That’s a... kid’s meal?” Bjorna politely corrected him with a smile.

“Oh, yeah, sure, I knew that. Of course I knew that. I meant, I wanted the uh... Big Hairy Lumberjack Breakfast. Yeah, that’s what I meant,” Fort frantically flipped through the pages of the menu.

“Okay. How would you like your eggs?” Bjorna casually scribbled into her notebook as Dodger leaned far back in his seat to squint at Fort.

“Eggs? Yeah, sunny side up, please,” Fort answered, closing the menu with masculine finality.

“Oh, of course. Kids always have fun popping the yolk and pouring it over the hash browns,” Bjorna giggled sincerely as she picked up the menus from the table.

“What? No, that’s not how I wanted my eggs. I meant, I want them like... as tough and as hard as you can make them,” Fort stuttered. Dodger somehow managed to lean back even farther as he continued to squint at Fort. “Like, super cooked. I like my eggs so hard and tough.”

“Okay, so an omelette then. Are you sure?” the edges of Bjorna’s mouth drooped down as she gritted her teeth.

“Yeah, of course. That’s how I always have my eggs. A well done omelette,” Fort crossed his arms and tried to give Bjorna a manly wink. She hid her subtle giggle behind the menus as she walked away.

“I’ll get you guys some coffee,” her voice called from across the diner. The two men sat in quiet as some unnamed old country song gently churned out of the loudspeaker. Fort stewed in his seat, clearly flustered.

“Ain’t you ever been here before?” Dodger asked, peering at Fort through the very bottom of his glasses.

“No. I always wanted to eat here but my parents never took me here,” Fort looked out the window to the road that led far out into the desert, to some distant, wonderful unknown he had never dared venture to.

“You’re a grown man. If you wanted to eat here, why didn’t you just come here yourself?” Dodger asked, softening his voice as he leaned forward.

“I don’t know, okay? I guess I just always wanted them to take me some place where I asked them to take me,” Fort crossed his arms. His voice became cold and distant. Dodger saw an injured, faraway look in Fort’s eyes; the look of a young man desperately reaching out for something he is just on the verge of realizing he will never be able to reach. Dodger wasn’t sure what to say or do. He never had a son. All he knew about raising a daughter into a young woman was to give her space and privacy, and to not pry when she got emotional or upset.

“Hey... uh. So...” Dodger floundered as he scrambled for words. Fort slouched as he drifted farther into the distance beyond the diner window. Dodger had really only ever seen Fort as the kid who liked photography and worked at the hardware store. He didn’t really know anything about Fort’s family or home life. “Hey. You think I can hit the fireplace across the room with this cup coaster?”

“What? Seriously?” Fort looked up, the tension on his face gradually easing away as his eyes brightened up. “You can seriously do that?”

“It’s a piece of cake. Watch this,” Dodger grinned, feeling some degree of pride in his confidence. He took an 8 Arms beer cup coaster in hand and stood up before gauging the distance to the target. The entire length of the diner lay before him. Fort turned around in his seat, his face glowing with the excitement of a thirteen year old boy who had just seen the coolest thing he had ever seen in his life. With an effortless swing of his arm and a flick of his wrist, Dodger sent the coaster slicing through the air like an arrow from a bow. It rolled as if riding a tidal wave out on the ocean, letting out a

satisfying whistle. It sailed through the entire building as if guided by fate. Right on target, just a few feet from the fireplace, the coaster somehow righted itself and lined up exactly on target. It was going to hit the dead center of the fireplace.

With a sudden, jarring bark, the golden retriever let out a piercing, clear sound. Dodger stumbled back as he swore he felt all the windows in the building rumble. The young man with blacked out glasses, sitting on the couch next to the fireplace, reached out with his right hand and gently snatched the speeding cup coaster out of the air as effortlessly as picking up a grape from a bowl. Dodger's face flushed red as he quickly sat down and set his hands on his lap, his eyes wide with shock and embarrassment. A smile grew on Fort's face until he suddenly burst into laughter. Dodger could not help but laugh along with him.

"That was so cool! Can you believe that kid just grabbed it like that?" Fort was in absolute awe. "But that throw was so amazing. It was totally gonna hit the fireplace!" Dodger leaned back, playing it cool, enjoying the fact that he could impress people with his tricks. As he stretched and set his right arm up on the back rest of the seat, he couldn't help but place his left hand on the table. Fort looked down at the bandage on Dodger's hand and frowned.

"Hey Dodger. I'm sorry I didn't go with you guys last night," Fort sighed, looking out the window to hide his shame.

"Why feel bad about it? There was nothing you could have done," Dodger replied with a cool, easy tone.

“Maybe if I went with you guys, you wouldn’t have gotten hurt,” Fort picked up and held a cup coaster, vaguely and half-heartedly imitating Dodger’s throwing technique.

“There’s no way you could possibly know what’s going to happen ahead of time. It’s not like you get to have a practice run for the future,” Dodger spoke, hearing a tone in his voice he reserved for when he needed to give Dahlia, his daughter, advice about life.

“I guess you’re right,” Fort said, setting the coaster down.

“So, you really want to help, huh?” Dodger asked, his voice become sharper.

“Yeah, how can I help?” Fort’s sat up in his seat.

“We need to find out where Bull Brandish is taking all these people. I was just in Dr. Allerdyce’s office. He had a map on his desk with some spot circled in red. I couldn’t get a good enough look at the map but I’ve got a feeling it’s got something to do with Bull,” Dodger spoke with a firm, direct tone in his voice as he leaned forward.

“What? So what do you want me to do about it?” Fort asked, excited at the prospect of possibly going on some kind of secret mission. “Steal the map!?”

“Look-... at the map. I want you to *look* at the map.” Dodger cut Fort’s words down the middle.

“Look! Yeah. Of course. *Look* at the map. Totally! Totally, totally. That’s definitely what I was going to say. Look.

At the map,” Fort straightened himself out, trying to look professional.

“Do you think you could pretend to have a stomach ache or something? Go in there and get a look at the map. Look for a name of anything on the map. A lake or pass or mountain, anything,” Dodger said, squinting hard at Fort.

“Sounds like it’s just a normal map. What makes you think there’s anything important about it?” Fort stared at Dodger, trying to understand his logic.

“Sometime last night Dr. Allerdycce injured his arm somehow,” Dodger’s left hand twitched as he looked down at the table. “He was dressing some wound this morning. His office was filled to bursting with outdoor and camping gear. I asked him a trick question to find out he purchased all that stuff earlier this morning, *before* he even had the chance to bandage himself up. That tells me two things. Wherever he got that injury, he wasn’t able to take of his arm. Secondly, picking up all that equipment must be important and must be in response to whatever happened when he got injured.”

“Whoa. Shit, man. Are you some kind of detective or something?” Fort sat back in awe as the morning light shifted angles and spilled onto their table.

“The Doc and I have a bit of history. He stopped me from getting a good look at the map. That’s where you can help, if you think you can handle it,” Dodger rubbed the bandage on his hand.

“That’ll be a piece of cake,” Fort crossed his arms with a confident grin. “All I’ve got to do is check the map and find

out where Bull's kidnap camp is, huh? I've been all over the mountain doing photography. This'll be easy."

"Easier than talking to a cute girl, I hope," Dodger gave a smirk from beneath his baseball cap's bill.

"Hey! Cut me some slack. She started flirting first, alright?" Fort laughed nervously.

"Hey, in speaking of that, our coffee is taking a while. I think I'd better see what's going on," Dodger lifted his head up to peak over at the counter.

"Oh, that's okay. I'll go up and talk to her," Fort offered, starting to get out of his seat.

"No, that's alright," Dodger stood up and stepped forward. "I want to talk to Bjorna. She said she had an uncle named Iron. If that's who I think it is, I'd like to ask her a few questions."