

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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Chapter XII

Dodger's truck inched its way up Slim's driveway, hesitant, as if struggling to delay the inevitable. Slim didn't seem to notice Dodger's white knuckles clenched tightly on the steering wheel as the vehicle came to stop.

"Hey, what was the deal meeting Nickelas at the public storage place?" Slim asked, patting down his pockets to make sure he still had Shellaby's spare keys on him.

"Nothing important," Dodger muttered from beneath his frazzled moustache.

"What was that square thing Nickelas gave you out of his storage unit?" Slim squinted, trying to read Dodger's poker face.

"Nothing," Dodger said, staring straight ahead.

"You sure spent a lot of time with Nickelas talking about nothing. Well, thank ya kindly, Dodger! Sure was awful nice of you to drive ol' Slim around town. Let me buy you a drink tonight at the bonfire," Slim swung his hand out, forcing Dodger to remove his ever tightening grip on the steering wheel. With a firm, assured handshake, Dodger snapped to his senses.

"Yeah, sure. Any time you need a hand," Dodger nodded back, meeting an unusual look of concern on Slim's

face. After all these years, Slim knew better than to pry. He knew the airtight look on Dodger's face. There was no way Slim could get him to talk, yet for some reason, he tried anyway.

"Everything alright, man?" Slim asked, his voice low and gentle.

"Nothing I can't handle. I'll be fine," Dodger said, seemingly to assure himself more than anyone else.

Slim left the truck, gently closing the door behind him with barely a sound. He lumbered on up to his porch and front door, giving Dodger a toothy grin while pointing to the spare house keys he waved up in the air.

Within the blink of an eye, Dodger's truck crept its way up Dodger's own driveway, rolling to an uneasy and apprehensive stop with its tail between its legs. Sure, Dodger could have asked Slim, or Fort, or anyone he could wrangle up to be there at the house with him while he entered his basement for the first time in weeks. He could have. But he didn't.

As he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, an image of his father appeared in his mind. Dodger recalled being barely nine years old as he visited the world renowned bowman, Honard Hall, at his property. When Dodger struggled to string his bow, Honard offered to help, but Dodger's father stopped him. "A man's gotta fight his own battles," his father said. Dodger ended up slipping and punching himself in the face, giving himself a black eye. Sure, it hurt, but it was a mistake Dodger never made again for the rest of his life.

When Dodger and Karol had their first major fight after getting married, Dodger asked his father what he should do. "A man's gotta fight his own battles," was all his father said. Dodger navigated the way through the rest of his marriage never making the same mistake again.

And when Dodger, in his 40's, found out that his father was suffering from stomach cancer and hiding that fact from Dodger, all his father said was, "I'm sorry. A man's gotta fight his own battles." Dodger was furious. Why would his father hide something like that from him? He could have sought medical treatments sooner if he hadn't hidden it. It was a lesson Dodger had no choice but to learn the hard way and to accept, but something just didn't sit right with him. Something his friend, Rauno, had said to him the night before kept echoing in his mind.

With gritted teeth, Dodger grabbed his bag of electrical parts he had picked up from the hardware store earlier that morning. With a confident stride and chest held out high, he made his way to the basement door, now in full view of the beaming autumn sunlight. Dodger glared down at the basement door through the bottom of his glasses before stepping aside and opening the house fuse box with a flick of his wrist. With his eyes locked on the basement door, he replaced whatever parts needed replacing in the fuse box entirely through his peripheral vision.

With fiery determination, he made his way through his house, finding all the burned out and melted electrical components that had been waiting for two weeks. Certain parts around the house had melted and changed shape so badly, they seemed nearly impossible to remove. Somehow,

these parts seemed twice as damaged as the ones he had replaced in other houses like Karn's and Willie's. With much sweat, bruised knuckles, a "shit" and a "godamn you" here and there, Dodger managed to replace all the parts in the house that had been damaged.

Somewhat out of breath, Dodger struggled to sit up from the ground after replace one last wall socket. His gut had somehow grown over the last few weeks and was getting in his way. When did that even happen? He made his way back to the fuse box outside the house, next to the basement door. With a deep, resonating snap, the fuse box kicked back into action. Dodger could hear a soft, gentle humming emanate from the basement as he made his way back into the house.

He caught his breath as he flicked a switch behind him just below his elbow. For the first time in weeks, he saw the light. A comforting glow appeared in his living room, casting back the shadows that had been growing increasingly taller around him. He looked at the mantle over the fireplace to see the photo of himself and Samba, and to the photo next to that with himself, Karol, and Dahlia, smiling while fishing on a dock at Burden Lake. Next to that was a photo of himself and his friend of many years, Bear Greentree, posing next to a great buck they had hunted together. All these photos stood proudly in hand crafted photo frames that Dodger had made himself using tools that had been passed down to him from his father; tools that Dodger kept in his basement.

Dodger smiled looking at the people in the photos; people that had moved on in life to new and exciting things without him. At least whatever they were doing now, they

were happy, and wasn't that more important than them needing Dodger?

Dodger quickly threw two weeks of dirty laundry into the washing machine, keeping one of his old shirts with him. He soaked the shirt with warm water before walking outside to find his weight lifting equipment behind the garage. Dodger wiped the thick layers of dust from his bench press, barbell, and weights, unable to remember the last he had used them.

He laid back on the bench and tried to lift up the barbell, realizing with a shock that he couldn't even lift the darned thing up off the rail. He removed some weights from the barbell and took off his jacket and shirt. With gritted teeth, Dodger picked up the barbell and brought it low to his chest, holding a moment before raising it up. A hazy memory of having weight lifting competitions with Rauno some distant years ago flashed through his mind. What would Rauno say if he could see Dodger struggling with such low weight now?

Dodger grunted as he felt his biceps and forearms burn, his muscles on the brink of tearing into shreds as he struggled to raise the bar up off his chest. Rauno used to spot him while bench pressing, and if Rauno wasn't there, Bear would do the job. If Bear wasn't there, Karol would spot him. But there was nobody there with him. He was alone. As if trying to prove to himself he was just as young and strong as ever, he bit off more than he could chew. He felt the weight of the barbell press down onto his chest, threatening to crush him.

There was no one there to save him. No one to help him. It was his decision to lift those weights unprepared and

with no one to spot him. He was going to have to fight his own battle. But the weight pressed down so hard that he could no longer breathe. The fresh wound on his left hand burned, threatening to tear open. If he couldn't lift that weight, he would definitely die.

He closed his eyes, recalling the frustration of being a teenager, practicing throwing knives for hours, not being able to stick the knives in the target no matter how hard he tried.

"Stay calm. Don't waste your energy. Focus on your target," Honard said to him.

With one focused, burning push, Dodger's forearms and chest muscles doubled in size as he forced the barbell up off his chest and back onto the rail. Exasperated, he rolled over onto his side, struggling to catch his breath before bursting out into laughter. After his breathing slowed down and the pain in his gut subsided, he curled a few sets with 25 pound free weights, struggling to recall old, familiar muscle tone which he had long since lost.

He walked back to the truck and picked up a large paper bag with some rattling rectangular object inside; something he had picked up from Nickelas at a storage unit earlier in the day. He held it in his trembling, exhausted arms as he stood at the foot of the basement door.

Dodger stared down at the door with a sober, sharpened fire in his eyes. Whatever had been down there, and whatever was still down there, it didn't matter. Dodger would have to deal with it because he *had* to deal with it. The door glared back up at Dodger, daring him to defy it.

Dodger spat out the side of his mouth as he leaned down to open the door. With an uneasy creak, the door whipped open, letting the sunlight flood in like water into a glass.

One step down into the basement. Dodger wondered what he would do if the creature was still down there.

Two steps down into the basement. What if the creature attacked him?

Three steps down into the basement. What if the creature starved to death and it was still in there, rotting away? Dodger lost track of the number of steps as he reached the door locked with a four digit number.

He pushed the buttons into the keypad.

The door is opening.

A loud click.

The lights turn on.

Inside is...

Nothing.

There was the oversized chair in the middle of the room. A camera tripod was positioned in the corner of the room. An old rope lay tangled across the floor. A rusted bear trap sat in closed position on the floor, one side of which the teeth had been angle grinded off. Dodger's tools were scattered all over his work benches. The shelves and boxes were all left open in shambles as if someone had been searching for something. There to his left, sitting on the table top was Million's angle grinder.

Dodger turned on another light on one of the tables and took out the rattling object from the paper bag. Shimmering under the work light was a thick frame with broken glass swimming all around. Mounted in the frame were around two dozen insects; butterflies the color of the sun, beetles the color of the sunset, dragonflies the color of the moon. Some insects had been knocked off their pins. Some wings and been torn off.

With surgical precision, Dodger removed the insects from the frame, setting them aside in a pattern to ensure he could return them to the frame in the original positions. He removed all the broken glass and used a shop vacuum to remove all debris from within the frame.

Dodger lightly tapped the play button on an old tape cassette player in the far corner of the basement. A melancholic electric guitar solo soared out of the old speakers, carried by a sweet acoustic guitar arpeggio and a gentle drum beat. Bran Steelhide's voice eased in alongside the guitar, singing something about hitch-hiking. Something about

sticking your thumb out for help, but walking down the road anyway in case no one stops to give you a ride. Dodger sang along to one of his favorite Midnight Falcons song while he sanded back the wood of the frame. By the time the next song started, Dodger was applying a generous layer of coffee colored oil stain to the wood along to the rhythm of the music.

Dodger found an old frame he had made to hold some awards for target shooting; awards he couldn't even remember winning. With focused strikes of a chisel and hammer, he popped apart the frame and removed the glass, holding it up to the frame that had previously held the insects. The glass was too big. Dodger measured where the glass needed to be cut. He measured twice and ran a glass cutting tool along his measurements with a flourish. After a gentle knock, the glass popped apart, fitting into the insect frame with clinical precision.

He carefully gathered the loose insect parts, setting the wings into a jewelry box that had previously been used to house some ring that must have been a present for Karol at some point. He put the insect legs into a separate box and set them carefully down on the table. After polishing the glass to an optical shine, he placed the insects back into the frame.

Back up into the house.

Put the laundry in the dryer.

Take a hot, relaxing bath for the first time in weeks.

Empty out the fridge of all the food that had spoiled.

Back to the basement.

Put the frame and angle grinder into the truck.

Dodger hopped back into his truck, flipping down his visor to find the paper he had stuffed there earlier in the day. He read the hastily scribbled home address from the paper as he shifted his truck into gear, easing out of his driveway with an effortless sigh of relief.

While stopping to fuel up at Sam's Gas Station, he picked up a six pack of Pale Moonlight, confident that he wouldn't stay late at the bar and would just have one or two drinks at home before going to bed at a reasonable hour. He greeted the gas station owner who had an unusually relaxed and easy expression on his face before asking for a map to figure out how to get to the address that was written down on the paper.

The sun was on the tired side of the sky by the time Dodger reached his destination; a ranch style house set back from the road about forty or so feet with weathered, shoulder height fences in desperate need of mending. Dry, thirsty grass and bushes that had been neglected for many years dotted the yard and surrounding property with reckless abandon. An exhausted wind scraped through the dry, dull landscape as Dodger parked his truck on the other side of the road to look at the house from a distance. He positioned his truck carefully so the garbage bins set on the side of the road didn't block his view.

After rolling down his windows, Dodger heard the distant humming of a two stroke motor and the scattering of leaves. There at the end of the driveway, just in front of the

garage door was a large, mountainous figure that could be recognized anywhere.

Iron Austin effortlessly whipped about the leaf blower in his hand, reaching out to the scattered autumn color all across his yard. Dodger didn't want to bother Iron while he was busy, so he sat and waited, determined to make his way up the driveway as soon as Iron finished his job. Iron moved from right to left, gathering up the leaves in the yard with the efficiency of a true professional. Dodger was somewhat shocked to witness the skill Iron flaunted while he flourished the leaf blower in his hand. It looked as if he was carrying a small hair dryer in his bear paw sized hands.

Just as Iron finished gathering all the loose leaves into a tight, tall pile, he powered down the leaf blower and paused. He looked up to the sky for a moment, taking in a deep breath before hanging his head in silence, seeming to wait for something. He walked to the other side of the pile and powered on the leaf blower to scatter the pile of leaves all over the yard.

Dodger went wide eye as he watched Iron undo all his work in an instant. Why the hell would Iron do that? Dodger watched as Iron paced back and forth, gathering the leaves into another tight pile at the opposite end of the front yard. Again, against all logic, Iron scattered the leaves across the yard again. The sound of the motor running out of fuel left Dodger sitting in uncomfortable silence. So now the leaf blower was out of fuel. Now what? Iron stepped over to the garage and opened the door to reveal three other leaf blowers of the same shape and style all lined up as if in a fleet, poised and ready for action.

Iron swapped out his old leaf blower for a fresh one and then returned to his work of moving the leaves from one end of the yard to the other. As the leaves moved from left to right, so did the sun across the sky. Dodger watched, wracking his mind to come up with some explanation for why Iron was doing this. It was starting to drive him crazy.

More than an hour passed when the front door opened and Dodger snapped to attention. Finally, something was happening. He watched as the most bitter-faced, pucker-lipped woman he had ever seen marched out of the house, holding some small white cardboard box in her hands. With a buzzsaw-like screech, she spoke, and even from all the way across the driveway, Dodger could hear her words.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you trying to poison me? You moron! You know I hate pecans. Jesus God Christ above, you really are useless,” the woman shouted at Iron as he shrank more and more, instinctively holding his leaf blower up as if it were a shield that could protect him. He stood silent, motionless, his eyes locked on that ground just before his feet. The woman threw the box at the ground with terrible force before shouting, “Put this in the garbage, you limp-dicked idiot! Lord Almighty I don’t know why God made you the way you are but he really fucked up.”

Dodger’s jaw nearly hit the floorboard as he watched the scene unfold. The woman stormed back indoors while Iron carefully set the leaf blower on the ground. As if handling a newborn baby that never had the chance to be born, Iron picked up the crumpled white box from the ground. He stared down at it for nearly two minutes as his body shuddered, his shoulders trembling. With small, apprehensive steps, he made

his way down the driveway, his eyes locked down on the box the whole way.

Iron reached the end of the driveway and stopped in front of the garbage bin. As he opened the garbage lid against his will, he openly wept as tears streamed from his eyes, carving a well worn path down his tired, old face and crag-filled beard. Dodger heard Iron's voice crack as it poured from his open mouth with a miserable, pathetic moan. Decades of hurt, pain, and resignation flowed out of the poor old man like a glass that had just been filled far too much, and kept being filled despite overflowing since many, many years ago. He had become a glass so full for so long that cracks had formed, and those cracks were about to split him into pieces.

Dodger felt a terrible, sharp pain in his chest as he sat in his truck and watched this gruff, seemingly undefeatable mountain of a man fall apart. Iron continued to sob as he held the box in his hands, clenching his eyes closed tightly. Dodger looked down at the six pack of beer sitting on the floorboard of his passenger seat before stepping out of his truck and crossing the road. He cleared his throat to make his presence known but it seemed Iron just didn't care. Dodger stopped next to the still sobbing man and lightly patted him on the back.

There, it became clear Iron didn't care who it was. With his eyes clenched shut, he turned and leaned in close, letting the tears flow. Iron was no longer the towering storm of a man who had beaten Dodger in a game of pool just the night before. Dodger set his arm around Iron's shoulder, unsure of what to do or say. He had never seen any of his friends come completely apart at the seams like that. As Iron

nearly crumpled at the knees, his arms fell lose. Dodger reached out and caught the small, bruised white box just before it fell to the ground. After a minute of standing in the street, Iron's breathing calmed down, and he stepped back to look Dodger in the eye. Iron stared, not surprised, not ashamed, not afraid. Dodger turned his back, still holding the cardboard box. He walked across the street and carefully set the box between the passenger and driver seat in his truck.

"Hop in. Let's have a beer." Dodger said with a wave. Without hesitation, Iron walked across the street and climbed up into the passenger seat of the truck.

The two men found comfort and solace in the noise of the engine as the truck made its way up the mountain. High up past the trailheads where Dodger loved to set out on hikes. Past the high altitude passes and past the meadows where Dodger and Bear used to enjoy hunting. Past Pullen's Station, Dodger chased the fading light of the evening sun retreating back onto the smoky, fiery west.

Dodger turned down a dirt road which sloped down before climbing up sharply. From the corner of his eye, he saw the small cardboard box slide and Iron reach out to grab it. A sweet smell drifted into the air as Iron picked up the box and set it on his lap. The two men made no eye contact and said nothing until the truck came to a stop at a clearing; a high altitude rocky outcrop with a sweeping view of the mountain to the north and the windswept valleys to the left. The sun yawned as it melted into a swirling, liquid canvas of faded gold and pink. Dodger turned his truck around so the back of the truck faced the sunset. He used to come here with Bear all the time, drinking beer and seeing how far they could throw

stones into the distance. They would talk big about their dreams for the future, and all the things they wanted to do with their lives. It had been years since they last sat there together. It had been a lifetime ago.

Dodger pointed to the six pack of pale moonlight on the floorboard before stepping out of the truck, sticking his chest out and holding his head up high. With a flick of his wrist, he lowered the tailgate of his truck, sat down, and turned around to see Iron slowly following him. Iron carefully sat onto the tailgate, the weight of his body lowering the truck considerably. He set the crumpled white box to his right and the beer between him and Dodger. The two men each grabbed themselves a beer, clinked their glasses together without making eye contact, and took in a well deserved drink.

“You gonna ask about it?” Iron asked, his voice low and cracking with hurt.

“It ain’t none of my business,” Dodger answered gruffly. “You talk it out if you feel like it.”

“So you saw her? My wife?” Iron asked, pouring his beer down his weary, dry throat.

“Yep,” Dodger answered, taking a gulp of his drink.

“She wasn’t always like that, you know. She was the sweetest thing when we were young. Before we got married. Things were different.” Iron emptied the bottle down his throat before carefully setting it down in the back of the truck. Dodger reached for another bottle, opened it, and handed it to Iron.

“People change,” Dodger muttered in a tough voice.

“You’re fuckin’ telling *me*, man!” Iron laughed, realizing the understatement of Dodger’s words.

“What’s in the box? Smells good,” Dodger asked roughly, trying to not sound all that interested. Iron picked up the box, set it up on his lap and carefully opened the lid, delicately, as if opening some treasured memory that only he and one other person were allowed to see. Inside, some cake that surely at one point had been delicately crafted with the utmost care and love was now a crushed dream, nothing but scattered pieces of something that had once meant something to someone.

“Key lime and pecan cheesecake. We had it on our first date. She said she loved it. Said it would be her favorite forever. We had it at our wedding. She looked so happy then. I guess I’m just a fuckin’ idiot. I thought if I gave her this cake today on our anniversary, it’d remind her of... I don’t know. Something, I guess. I got no fuckin’ clue,” Iron spoke, his voice clearing and tightening up. Dodger wasn’t sure what to say that. Not even Karol ever got this emotional. Instead, Dodger just said the first thing that came to his mind.

“Sorry. The beer’s warm. It’s shit,” Dodger finished the rest of his drink.

“This is the best beer I’ve had in years,” Iron’s voice wavered as tears flowed from his eyes, shimmering in the golden light of the setting sun. Dodger turned away to avoid making eye contact, listening to Iron sniffle. Dodger opened another set of drinks and handed one to Iron, not looking toward him.

Dodger turned around and reached into a tool box in the truck bed, retrieving a large paper bag. Carefully, slowly, Dodger removed a rectangular object wrapped in towels. On the back of the frame, Dodger noticed the words, "Dan Austin" and "Iron Austin" written proudly in permanent marker. Dodger returned to his seat and held the frame flat, revealing the brilliant colors of the insects mounted inside, glowing with the luminescence of the sighing evening sun.

"Hey. You seen this before?" Dodger asked gruffly.

"Sweet succotash. Where in the hell did you find that?" Iron's eyes widened with some long lost passion. The joy of some childhood memory glinted off the radiant wings and glistening carapaces in the frame, reflecting the last trickle of the light of the day, reflecting more colors than even existed in the real world.

"Not important where I got it," Dodger took a casual drink of his beer, setting his leg up on the tailgate and gazing up into the purple glow of the sky.

"Jeez. How'd you find out about this? I haven't seen this in years. My uncle and I used to go bug hunting all the time. Before..." Iron smiled a youthful grin, the tears disappearing from his face as his voice wavered. "It looks brand new. Like the day we put 'em in there."

"Not quiet yet," Dodger retrieved the small jewelry box from his pocket. He turned to his side, making eye contact as he held the box up, offering it to Iron.

"What? Hey, we just met, man. It's a bit early for marriage, isn't it?" Iron chuckled.

“Godamnit, you’re an asshole. Just take the box,” Dodger laughed, openly grinning as he took another drink. Iron opened the box to find the loose wings and other fragments that had broken apart over the many brutal years that had passed. “I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout all this stuff. I did what I could with the frame but I figured you’d wanna put the rest of those little fellas back together.”

The grin on Iron’s face grew wider as he gently ran his hands along the glass, remembering where he and his uncle Dan had caught every last one of those insects. Memories of his childhood running up and down mountain streams, sifting through mossy logs, swinging a net while jumping through glowing meadows, knowing his uncle was trying to give him the kind of life he knew his father could not.

“I... I don’t got no place at my house to work on something like this,” Iron sighed, taking a big drink.

“Use my workshop. There’s all the tools you need at my house,” Dodger shrugged with a cool, distant attitude. Iron turned to look at Dodger, making direct eye contact. Gone was Iron’s stony shield, his leathery armor, and his aged, tough exterior. His brows rose up like mountain peaks, the vulnerability of his soul as plain to see as the amber glow of the setting sun, casting the trees and mountain in one last radiant splash of color before the cool of night brought a soothing wind to the world.

“Alright. You beat me. What do you wanna know?” Iron sighed, finishing the rest of his drink.

"I ain't trying to beat nobody. You're either a good man or a bad man, that's all I care about," Dodger shrugged. Iron took a slow, deep breath, taking in Dodger's words.

"What do you wanna know about Bull Brandish? I heard you been asking around about him," Iron exhaled, his eyes and soul clear as stars in the night sky for the first time in decades.

"Bull Brandish. He's been talking to a lot of folks around town. He never talks to nobody. But this past month or so with all them lights in the sky, he's suddenly real talkative. I wanted to ask you what he talked to you about," Dodger said, taking an easy sip from his drink.

"Oh, yeah. Bull heard someone was interested in taking up Golden Ridge Ranch, you know, my uncle Dan's old property. But seeing as how you tracked down these old bugs, I guess you already know about my uncle. Well, Bull told me under no circumstances should I let anyone buy that property, much less move onto it," Iron said easily as if speaking to a friend of many years. "We got in a bit of a tussle. I told him it was none of his business what I do with uncle Dan's ranch."

"Did he say why?" Dodger asked, his brow furrowing as he tried to put the pieces together.

"He didn't explain real good. He only said something about dangerous animals or something," Iron shrugged as he emptied the rest of his drink. Dodger opened the last beer bottle and handed it to Iron who took it with a confused look. "Ain't this one yours?"

“I gotta drive our asses back to town. You have it,” Dodger leaned back, watching the very last of the sun’s whispers fade from the sky. “Did he say anything about them funny lights in the sky folk’s around town have been seeing lately?”

“No, he didn’t say nothin’ ‘bout that, but I got a feeling you wanna ask about the ranch,” Iron took a sip from his drink.

“I ain’t gonna ask anything you don’t wanna talk about,” Dodger shrugged.

“Jeez, man. Look at the day I’m having. Ask me anything you want,” Iron grunted, picking up some of the gruff exterior he had shed away over the course of the day.

“For years, Dan told people about lights he used to see around the ranch. He talked about the weird shit that used to happen there. Animals getting ripped clean in half down the middle. Trees getting picked up and moved in the middle of the night. Do you believe in all that?” Dodger finally asked, letting go of a tension that had been building inside him. For a brief moment, a look of hurt and anger flashed across Iron’s face, but looked down at the frame in his hands, and the saving moment of brotherhood that Dodger had shared with him.

“No. Uncle Dan... he heard a lot of monster stories about what happened to my pop back in the 80s. His logging crew disappeared. Well, we get bears and wolves around here. Uncle Dan couldn’t let it go. He got obsessed with them stories. Started believing in them grey aliens and tree monsters. He drank to cope with the stress. One day, he just

fell into a bottle and, well, with the shape of a bottle of whiskey, there ain't no climbing out. Uncle Dan was a good man who fell apart, and he wouldn't even let me try to save him," Iron let the words that had been building up within him for years finally escape, out there into the cooling night air. "The only monsters in this world are the ones we fail to raise into good people."

The two men sat in silence as they listened to a soft blue breeze brush the tops of the trees around them. Dodger processed the information Iron had given him, understanding then that Bull indeed knew more about Golden Ridge Ranch than Iron knew. Still, there were people in town missing and Bull must know more about what is happening. Bull must know animals like the cougar that attacked Dodger were more common than people realized.

"Well, I don't know what to do with this damn cake. Chuck it over the cliff, I guess," Iron grunted roughly, his voice returning to that of the powerful man Dodger had first met in the bar the night before.

"Why? Don't you like that cake?" Dodger asked, scratching his moustache.

"I... I like this cake a lot. But that woman. She ruined it for me. She ruined a lot of things for me," Iron said, the muscles on his forearms tightening up.

"Things that get broken can be fixed. Things that get ruined can be un-ruined. A man can't let other people go around destroying things that he likes," Dodger explained in his coolest, gruffest voice. Iron looked at Dodger with a look of

awe and vulnerable admiration. “If you like that cake, let’s eat that fuckin’ cake. Don’t let nobody ruin your cake.”

“Yeah... Yeah! You’re right. You got any spoons or anything?” A great big smile grew on Iron’s face.

“Spoons? Come on! We’re Silver Falls boys, aren’t we? We don’t need no spoons,” Dodger grunted as he reached over with his bare hand and grabbed a chunk of the key lime and pecan cheesecake sitting on Iron’s lap, tearing through decades of pain and resentment. Iron gasped with shock as he watched Dodger carelessly jam a handful of cake into his mouth. Iron grinned for a moment before swiping his bear paw sized hand down into the cake that he had loved, hated and feared for so many years of his life, tearing into it with nothing but his own strength and force of will. He followed Dodger’s example, jamming a handful of cake into his mouth with reckless abandon, and it was damn good cake. Iron had decided, and knew at that moment that he would never again let anyone stop him from eating his cake.

The two friends finished dinner and washed their hands with the rest of the beer left in Dodger’s bottle. Iron carefully wrapped the frame with towels and tucked it back into Dodger’s toolbox. They took one last look over the ever stretching world just below their feet, knowing they were no longer strangers who lived in the same town, but rather, brothers for the rest of their lives.

“Alright, hop in, partner,” Dodger said, turning his collar up to the cold and damp of the night, “we got a bonfire to get to.”