

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

Jerrel Dulay

Chapter XIII

The sound of Dodger's boots hitting the old floorboard of The Dusty Cactus echoed through a surprisingly empty bar. A couple of silhouettes milled about the room, whispering hushed words while pointing toward Dodger and Iron who had just dropped themselves down onto barstools. The lights seemed more dim and the air seemed more dusty than usual. A melancholic rock song from the 60's creaked out of the jukebox. With arms full to bursting with firewood, Clementine appeared from out of the backroom.

"Be with ya in a sec, boys," Clementine smiled as she circled the bar counter and made her way to the back of the room.

"Oh, let me help you with all that," Iron said, quickly getting up from his seat. Dodger tapped the back of his hand against Iron's arm then pointed down onto the bar.

"Just have a seat. Clementine ain't that kind of lady," Dodger said proudly.

"I gotcha. Your bartender sure is a hell of a lot cuter than ours up at the station," Iron said, dropping back down onto his seat. From the corner of his eye, he watched the men at the other end of the bar continue to whisper and point.

"Is the station up there normally closed this time of the week? You could always come on down here to our bar, you

know,” Dodger said, watching the men at the other end of the bar through his peripheral vision.

“They’re normally open, but Atticus, our bartender, said he was busy tonight and wasn’t gonna be in the area. Bit unusual for him,” Iron said, pretending to not notice the shadow of a man taking heavy steps toward Dodger. Iron clenched his fists, wondering if some fist fight was about to break out as a burly bear of a man with lightning filled eyes and a fiery, wild beard planted his legs firmly and stuck his chest out just inches away from Dodger.

With the flash of lightning, the approaching man swooped in close toward Dodger and grabbed him by the back of the neck. The man jammed his face within inches of Dodger’s eyes. Sparks shot out across the bar’s surface as their mustaches rubbed against each other like two flint stones. The man closed his eyes and planted a heavy, deep kiss right on Dodger’s lips. Iron’s eyes went wide with abject shock as he nearly fell out of his seat, utterly unable to process the situation.

The man stepped back, looking at Dodger, waiting for a reaction. Yet despite the fire that had nearly started, Dodger’s expression hadn’t changed at all since he first sat down. During the exchange, he hadn’t flinched, or even blinked. His poker face was unshaken.

“Holy shit. No way,” a crackling voice called out from the other end of the bar.

“You actually did it,” another voice gasped.

“I don’t believe it. He didn’t even flinch.”

“Well, like I said. That guy is unbreakable. Now pay up, fellas. That’ll be twenty buckaroos from the both of ya,” a deep, jovial voice laughed.

The gruff man that had kissed Dodger waited for a moment until Dodger looked up at him and gave him a nod. Gus Ironcock nodded in return before walking back to the other end of the bar, modestly taking a twenty dollar bill that had been set on the bar counter. He quietly bumped fists with Wirriam Shipwright, who was still openly laughing at the two bewildered men who had lost their bet.

“What the hell? I thought *our* bar was wild but you guys are crazy down here,” Iron gasped, his jaw hanging low with heavy disbelief. He eyed the rough looking fella at the other end of the bar, then looked at Dodger, understanding then that Dodger’s reputation regarding poker and dice were not exaggerations. “Does that... happen often?”

“Only when Wirriam thinks he can sucker some gullible out-of-towners out of money,” Dodger shrugged, unmoved by the situation. Iron continued to watch Gus at the other end of the bar, trying to figure him out.

“Alright boys, what can I get ya? This’ll be the last order for inside. We’re heading to the backyard after this,” Clementine hurried back behind the bar and washed her hands. “Oh, hey, Dodger, who’s your cute friend?”

“This is Iron, a good buddy of mine,” Dodger said casually as Iron blushed and looked away from Clementine.

“Nice to meet ya, sugar. Gus said he’s got your guys’ next drink. Did you do the thing again?” Clementine asked, reaching for two glasses from a shelf.

“Yep,” Dodger shrugged.

“Jeez. What am I gonna do with you boys?” Clementine laughed while shaking her head. “Alright then, Iron, what’ll it be?”

“I’ll have 8 Arms please,” Iron looked up and smiled back at Clementine.

“Sorry sugar, we don’t have that here,” Clementine leaned on the bar and gave Iron a closer look.

“Uh... make it a Buff Squirrel,” Iron said decidedly.

“What? Serious? I thought they stopped making that beer years ago. Handsome Stag?” Clementine asked.

“Oh, shucks... Sorry little lady, I’m married,” Iron blushed, trying to hide his face from Clementine.

“No, that’s... a beer,” Dodger said, nearly applying his open palm to his face.

“I gotcha. We don’t have that up at the station. Never heard of it. Hell, it’s that kind of night, I guess. I’ll try something new. Make it a Handsome Stag then,” Iron said confidently with slap of his palm down on the bar.

“Make that two, please,” Dodger added.

“Your friend really is pretty cute,” Clementine giggled as she hurriedly poured their drinks. After she handed their

glasses to them, she locked the front door and made her way to the back of the bar with an ice chest in tow. "Alright, fellas, we better get out there before Slim hurts himself starting the bonfire."

Dodger and Iron got up and walked through the dimly lit bar, eventually crossing paths with the men who had won the bet. A man in his 60s whose face was creased with countless lines from decades of smiles and laughter stood up and leaned in toward Dodger.

"Smoochy, smoochy, smoochy! Come here, Dodger!" Wirriam laughed as he made a puckered his lips. Dodger extended his arm out, gently pushing against Wirriam's chest.

"I'm drawing the line right there. You're way too ugly," Dodger said dryly. Wirriam's clutched his chest, giving a look of wretched pain with his tongue sticking out as if he had just been shot with a gun.

"Ohhhh! You're breakin' my heart! I think I'm dyin'," Wirriam fell back on his stool, clutching his chest.

"Alright, well, you can stay here and die. We're heading out," Dodger couldn't stop a laugh from escaping him as he stepped around Wirriam and made his way to the back door. The four remaining men in the building stepped out the back door to the smell of a freshly started fire. The sweet scent of crackling firewood brought some sense of comfort to Iron as he looked around to see the smiling faces of people he didn't really recognize; faces illuminated by some last lingering sliver of sunset light and a dancing fire. He felt some enveloping and bittersweet sense of peace being surrounded by people who didn't already know him; people who didn't

expect him to be someone they thought they knew, and people who would not judge him for not meeting their expectations. No one there at the bonfire knew him. He could be anything and anyone he wanted without judgment. The backyard was encircled by a weathered wooden fence that seemed to shelter the bar patrons from the rest of the world, giving them some safe place to rest a while; to be whoever they wanted to be and do whatever they wanted to do. In one corner of the back yard toward the already set sun was an old fishing boat and at the opposite end toward the rising moon was a horseshoe throwing pit. Iron took a slow, deep breath, swirling with the clear scent of a fresh start.

“Hey, Gus, this is my buddy, Iron. Would you mind showing him around? I gotta talk to somebody over there,” Dodger asked the muscular, butch man who was chatting with some other locals sitting by the bonfire.

“You betcha,” Gus said with a point and a nod. “Howdy, Iron. I’m Gus. Nice to meet ya.”

“Good to meet ya, Gus. You ain’t gonna kiss me, are ya?” Iron asked, wide eyed, taking a small step back.

“Relax, I’m married,” Gus chuckled with a wink.

Dodger walked over to a small figure sitting up on top of a picnic table, leaning back and enjoying a Pale Moonlight. The figure seemed lost, his eyes searching deep within the bonfire for something he was already certain he wouldn’t find.

“Hey Karn, how are ya?” Dodger asked, stepping up onto the picnic bench and sitting down on the table.

“Oh, Dodger! My friend! I’m good, how are ya? What have you been up to?” Karn quickly slipped his distant expression back into his pocket as he moved over to make room for Dodger to sit.

“Nothing much. Hey, was just wondering. What happened last night? You disappeared suddenly. Everything alright?” Dodger asked, trying to not sound too interested.

“What? Uh... No I didn’t. I hung out here until, you know, a normal time. Like usual. And then I just went home,” Karn smiled, the corners of his mouth flinching for the briefest of moments.

“Did it have anything to do with Bull Brandish?” Dodger asked dryly. He could hear Karn gulp hard as Karn’s eyes darted left and right, searching for an answer.

“Haha, what would I have to do with a guy like Bull? I barely even know the guy, hardly, if at all,” Karn nervously forced laughter. Dodger turned to look Karn in the eyes, no longer able to hide some degree of hurt he felt.

“Come on, man. Why don’t you trust me? How long have we known each other? You can’t tell me what’s going on?” Dodger said, his poker face dropping entirely.

“It’s not that,” Karn’s eyes softened, realizing he had done something to upset his friend. He took a long drink before saying “Bull is a scary guy. If he finds out I talked, I just don’t know what he would do to me.” The two friends sat quietly for a moment, listening to the gently crackling fire and the distant voices chattering away, accented by laughter in the

distance. A set of footsteps approached them from behind, reaching out seemingly from somewhere in the far distance.

“Hey there, Karn. I came by to see if you wanted to share a ride tonight,” a familiar, mellow voice came from the shadows cast by the glow of the campfire.

“Holt! Hey there, kid. Good to see you,” Karn said, his eyes nervously darting back and forth, pointing to Dodger sitting next to him. Holt noticed the signal Karn was giving to him and stood silently, calculating what to say next.

“Karn, it’s your turn for horseshoes! Get on over here!” Clementine called out from across the back yard of the Dusty Cactus.

“Oh! That’s me! I gotta go! Be back in a minute!” Karn chirped as he hopped off the table and jogged to the other side of the yard.

“Hey, nice to see you again,” Dodger said, standing up. He extended his hand, meeting a firm, assured handshake from the young man. Holt’s eyes glowed with unknowable depth in the light of the campfire.

“Good to see you, Dodger. You look a bit rattled. Is everything alright?” Holt asked, looking down at Dodger’s left hand.

“Yeah, good, good. Just a long day is all. How about you? Did your uh... wood chopping go alright?” Dodger asked, taking a sip of his drink.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Fine. Man, you’ve got good memory,” Holt said with a surprised look on his face.

“Not nearly good enough,” Dodger muttered under his breath.

“Huh? What was that?” Holt asked, stepping in closer.

“Oh, uh, did you want a drink? Let me get you something,” Dodger offered, holding his glass of Handsome Stag up.

“No thanks. I’m not here for a drink. I’m just meeting up with some friends, but thanks for the offer,” Holt said with a cool shrug.

“Hey, so, your granddad, Hogan. I worked with him for years at Flatwoods Electrical. We were pretty close friends I guess you could say. Did you ever hear the stories folks around town said about him from back in the 80s?” Dodger lowered his guarded tone and leaned in close to Holt.

“About the hunting trip where his friend, Bud Dollarbuck went missing? He always tried to hide it from me, but Silver Falls is a small town. It’s hard to hide anything in a place like this,” Holt said, gazing deep into the growing blaze of the bonfire.

“Hogan never seemed like the type of fella that would hurt anyone. Still, you know what people have said. That he and Arnalt covered up Bud’s death for years,” Dodger said aggressively, trying to elicit some kind of emotional reaction from the young man.

“People believe a lot of different things for a lot of different reasons,” Holt shrugged, his gaze unbroken. Dodger was taken aback at Holt’s reserved reaction, suddenly fearing he would have a tough time beating Holt in a game of poker.

“Arnalt and Hogan... years ago, they used to tell everyone they saw lights in the sky. You know, like them UFOs. They used to tell folks they followed the lights out into a clearing in the woods. One of the lights came down to them. The next thing they knew, Bud was gone. But that sounds crazy, right? Do you believe in all that? Aliens and that nonsense?” Dodger prodded, seeing if Holt would react.

“Well, I’ve never paid much attention to those old stories. If you want to believe in UFOs and all that, then go ahead. It doesn’t really change anything, does it? It’s more important to focus on the things in your life that actually matter. Don’t waste your time reaching for the stars if you can’t even reach what’s right in front of you, you know what I mean?” Holt spoke softly. Dodger flinched, unable to believe that he was speaking to a man who was only 22 years old. He felt a night breeze carry the warmth of the bonfire to him as he pondered Holt’s words. Why was Dodger doing any of this anyway? Why was he chasing after shadows that seemed to always be just out of his reach? Why was he chasing after Bull Brandish? Why was he looking for supposed mysterious lights in the sky? Did any of it really matter? What would it matter if he found any answers to his questions? What did matter in his life? Did Karol matter? Did Dahlia matter? For a moment, Dodger brushed his hands around the thought that none of this mysterious business actually mattered, and that he should just give it up. But if he gave up this chase, what would be left for him? An empty home, a wife and a daughter who didn’t really need him anymore?

“Ding! A ringer! That’s it! You got it, baby!” Karn’s excited voice rang out from across the yard.

“Hey, Dodger,” Holt gave Dodger a long, deep look, as if searching his eyes for something. “You haven’t seen anything weird around town, have you? Like... a door and a doorframe standing out in the middle of nowhere, like out of a burned down house or something.”

“Wha-... What?” Dodger’s face contorted in confusion. Why would Holt ask such a strange and specific question? “No, I haven’t seen anything like that. Why do you ask?”

“Art project. I’m looking for doors like that. I like drawing ‘em. Sometimes you find ‘em when houses in the woods have burned down. If you see any like that, let me know sometime, would ya?” Holt said casually as he waved to someone across the yard.

“Yeah, no problem,” Dodger said, trying to read Holt’s expression. There was something about Holt’s tone that Dodger couldn’t grasp. Holt then sniffed the air and gave Dodger a confused look.

“Hey, is there cake here? Something smells really good,” Holt asked, suddenly distracted.

“What? Oh, no. It’s nothing,” Dodger said, blushing a bit.

“Oh, bummer... Well, it was good to have a chat. I gotta ask Clementine something. Seeya around,” Holt said with a cool shrug before patting Dodger on his arm and walking off. Karn danced his way back to the picnic table, making the shape of guns with his hands, pretend shooting into the air.

“Ooh, I’m doing so well tonight! Dodger, are you sure you don’t want to get in on this game? I might be a challenge for you this time,” Karn grinned from ear to ear. Dodger just didn’t have the heart to ruin Karn’s mood by asking him further about what happened the night before.

“Maybe next time,” Dodger smiled and took a sip of his beer before patting Karn on the shoulder. As Karn hopped up to take his seat on the table, the sound of wheels rolling over gravel and a familiar, chirpy voice appeared behind Dodger.

“Hello, Mr. Rodgers! It’s me, Kathelynn, from earlier today!” the young lady with bright, clear eyes gave a toothy grin. She extended her hand forward and gave Dodger a firm handshake.

“Well, hello, young lady. Nice to see you again,” Dodger couldn’t help but smile back.

“Hey, sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear some of your conversation. I wasn’t eavesdropping, honest! It’s just sometimes the night wind carries voices, you know. I heard you asking about lights in the night sky or whatever. Well, my friend, Rominic, was telling me a story about when he was doing food deliveries out in the desert around two weeks ago. He said he saw some weird stuff but no one believes him. If you want to ask him about it, he’s over there at the picnic table doing his homework,” Kathelynn said excitedly, pointing to a young man wearing a work uniform for Chunky Chicken, the local fast food restaurant.

Dodger went wide eye as he took in the information. Karn’s jaw dropped, unable to hide his shock. His brow

tightened up as he looked at Kathelynn, looking as if he wished she hadn't just said that.

"Sure, thank you. I think I'll go do that," Dodger muttered as his heart raced. His ears felt uncomfortably hot as he stepped around the bonfire and approached a familiar looking young man who was intently writing into a notebook surrounded by books about mechanical engineering spread out across the picnic table. Dodger thought he recognized him. It was the young man who had just received a new Chekhov gun from Shellaby's gun shop earlier that day.

"Hey there, partner. Mind if I bother you for a second?" Dodger spoke, unable to hear his own voice. Was he finally going to find some answers?

"Hiya Mr. Rodgers. Sure, I'm happy to chat," Rominic said, looking up from beneath his baseball cap adorned with googly eyes.

"You're a friend of Mr. Dollarbuck's right?" Rominic asked, setting his pencil down.

"I guess you could say that. We've known each other for years," Dodger said, sitting down across from the young man.

"Maybe you should come by the garage for a visit sometime? Boss doesn't really have a lot of friends," Rominic said as he reached for his energy drink from across the table.

"Suppose I could do that," Dodger said, trying to figure out why Rominic would say something like that. "So, I heard you seen some weird stuff in the desert about two weeks ago."

“Yeah, it was weird. No one believes me,” Rominic gave Dodger a pained expression.

“If you got the time, I’d like to hear your story,” Dodger felt his knuckles burn hot. Was he really ready to hear what Rominic had to say about the lights in the sky?

“Well, sure, but it’s weird. I don’t expect you to believe me,” Rominic took a sip of his energy drink before looking down and rolling his pencil across his notebook. “I was doing a delivery out to a house around 10 at night. This guy had been ordering food pretty much every day for the past week or so. Last name was Weatherstone or something like that. Seemed like a nice guy, but as the week went on, he started getting more and more weird. It was like he wasn’t getting any sleep or even leaving his house. Well, this one night, he left his front gate locked. I had to climb over and walk up his driveway. Well, this is crazy, right? He didn’t answer the front door. There was no one in the house at all. I left the food for him anyway and these weird... I don’t know, man, these giant coyote things came out of nowhere! They had mange or something, like a chupacabra thing, but they were like the size of a horse! Luckily I ran back to my car in time and that’s when I saw these three bright green lights in the sky. They were flying around, then they moved toward town and I lost sight of them. But they were fast, man! And they moved like... crazy. Anyway, the next day was weird too, but that’s a whole other thing. Anyway, Mr. Dollarbuck didn’t want me going around without a gun to protect myself. Obviously I told my parents what happened and my mom freaked out. She thinks it was ghosts. She barely let Mr. Dollarbuck buy me a gun because what can a gun do to a ghost? Anyway, that’s what I saw. Crazy, right?”

Dodger listened intently, clenching his fists tightly as he put the pieces together. Something about Rominic's description triggered a burning phantom pain in Dodger's left hand. From the corner of his eye, Dodger could see Holt watching them and listening in from a distance.

"I believe you, kid. I was... attacked by a cougar last night," Dodger set his left hand on the table, his stitched wound glistening as the fire light cast canyon-like shadows across his fresh injury.

"Whoa, no way! You too?" Rominic gasped.

"What do you mean you too?" Dodger's eyes went wide.

"Dodger! Get over here! It's time for a shot!" Karn shouted with glee from across the yard. Dodger turned around just in time to see Karn dancing his way around the fire to hand Dodger a shot glass.

"No, I didn't really want to drink that much tonight," Dodger said softly. Iron stepped forward with renewed bravado and chest held out. He held his shot glass out, waiting for the other two men to clink all their glasses together.

"A shot for my new buddies," Iron smiled with his eyes ignited from the fire light. Dodger couldn't bear the thought of disappointing Iron, so he took the glass in hand and they gave each other's glasses a sturdy clash. The downed their shots in an instant. For the first time in years, Iron let go of some terrible weight he had been carrying on his shoulders. "Wooooo yeah!" he hollered out into the night sky. "That was good stuff!"

“Wooooo ya!!” Karn followed along with a smile as he watched the look on Iron’s face.

“That was really smooth, what was that?” Dodger asked, surprised and grateful that it wasn’t something like Grandpa’s Juice.

“Don’t know, something called Winter Water,” Iron said, grabbing Karn and Dodger’s glasses with his fingers before handing them back to Clementine. Karn gave Dodger a confused, concerned expression as he sniffed the air.

“Hey, is there cake here? Something smells really good,” Karn asked, looking around to see where the smell was coming from. Dodger and Iron exchanged looks for a moment before sharing a chuckle.

“No, there’s no cake. You must be imaging things,” Dodger said dryly.

“Aww, but it smells really good here,” Karn sighed.

“Here, Clementine mixed these for us. It’s called Expired Dynamite,” Iron handed mixed drinks to Karn and Dodger, the ice clattering hard against the sides of the glass.

“No, wait, I really can’t,” Dodger said, apprehensively taking the glass. He wanted to keep an eye on Holt’s movements to see where he and Karn would go after leaving the bar. Surely, Fort would show up to the bonfire any minute as they had discussed, and he would be able to tell Dodger what he saw on Dr. Allerdyce’s map.

“Gus! Hey, where’s Gus? Get over here, fella. I got a drink for ya,” Iron’s voice boomed across the yard as he held a glass up into the air.

“Hey, Clementine,” Dodger struggled to crane his neck around Iron’s massive body blocking his way. “What’s in this drink?” he tried to ask, but Iron blocked Dodger’s line of sight by hanging his arms over the shoulders of Karn and Gus while loudly laughing at some joke Karn had told.

“...And the funny part was, she actually *was* a fish!” Karn blurted out with wide eyes and waving arms. Iron laughed loudly before slapping the little old man on the back, nearly knocking him over.

“This little guy is a riot. Hey, Dodger what do you think of the drink? Pretty good, right?” Iron asked, grinning ear to ear. His face had become easy and relaxed.

“Well, I didn’t really want to drink tonight...” Dodger mumbled as Iron cut him off before he could finish.

“You guys. I want to say something. You got a really great bar here. And you’re all such good folks. And this guy. Let me tell you about this guy. This is Dodger. I just met the guy. But let me tell you. This is a good man. One of the best guys I ever met. I hope you all know how lucky you are to have a friend like him. I don’t even care that he kisses other dudes,” Iron spoke, slurring his words and holding his glass up in the air.

“Godamnit,” Dodger sighed, applying his open palm to his face with an audible slap.

“Hey, that’s cool. I don’t give a fuck. I’ll kiss a dude. Whatever, man. But, what I’m trying to say. Dodger’s a real good guy. So... yeah,” Iron held out his drink for Dodger to clink glasses with him.

“Yeah! Kiss a dude!” Karn cheered with a laugh.

Dodger sheepishly bumped glasses with Iron, unable to bring himself to disappoint his new friend. He couldn’t help but smile back and take another drink.

Drinks came and drinks went down the hatch. Dodger struggled to keep his vision straight as he watched Holt stand at the corner of the yard just beyond the light of the fire. At some point in the evening, Holt was joined by a red haired young woman and the guy who runs the gas station. They looked on at Karn with disapproval as he enjoyed drink after drink with Iron. It was when Iron lifted up Karn using just one arm, and Karn laughed out, “Look how strong this guy is!” that Dodger thought he heard the red haired woman say something like, “Bull is not gonna be happy about this.” What was that supposed to mean?

“I think we’ll have to leave Karn here,” maybe Holt said. Dodger couldn’t be sure exactly what they were saying over the sound of laughter and roaring fire.

People came and people went. Slim told stories by the fire. Kathelynn listened intently with a great smile on her face and a sparkle in her eyes. People laughed. People drank. Million Dollarbuck showed up and got his angle grinder back from Dodger before sitting down for a drink. As the night quieted down, Dodger sat down with Iron, both their heads spinning with Winter Water. Dodger saw the look of ease and

comfort on Iron's face and could not help but be overwhelmed with compassion for him. The two men sat side by side close the fire, watching each flame live its entire existence in the blink of eye, reaching up to the stars, destined to fade away before getting anywhere near the sky.

"Hey, Dodger. I know this is mushy shit. But, you know. Thanks for being there for me today," Iron said, sipping slowly at his glass of Expired Dynamite.

"Don't mention it. When you need a pal, when you need a brother, I'm here. You don't even need to ask," Dodger said. The only thing he could focus his vision on was the glass in his hand.

"I... I'm scared of her, you know? There's nothing I can do about it. I got no control over my life," Iron's voice started to crack. "I don't want to go back there. I can't. I'm scared, Dodger. I don't know what to do."

Dodger shifted in his lawn chair to look at Iron, his face contorted with pain and hurt. He picked up his chair and moved it as close as it could get to Iron's chair before sitting down again. He put his arm over Iron's shoulder, feeling him trembling with fear, hatred and rage.

"It'll be alright, Iron. You'll be alright," Dodger said softly. Apprehensively at first, Iron set his arm around Dodger's shoulder. They watched the fire for a while until Karn quietly set down a chair next to Dodger and took a seat. Dodger leaned back and took a long drink from his glass. "You know, I don't really want to go home either. My wife's got a new job. She's happy. But she doesn't need me anymore, you know? I spent my whole life feeling good, thinking, this is it.

I'm her guy. I'll make her happy for the rest of her life. But now, I don't know. You know? She just moved on without me." Dodger gritted his teeth as if he would be able to hold back an entire ocean of rage and hurt.

"People change," Iron muttered softly after a moment of silence. Dodger smirked, hearing his own words echoed back at him. Karn stared deep into his drink, desperate to find some words to say to make Dodger feel better, but no words came to him. Karn ground his teeth with frustration knowing there was nothing he could do to help. No Starglass gift, no joke, no advice he could offer would make things better. Karn cursed his powerlessness as he looked away from Dodger and out toward the shadows past the bonfire.

A quiet moment passed before Iron slowly stood up and looked around the yard. There were still about six or seven others hanging out and enjoying the fire. Yet there were three people who were no longer there.

"Oh, shit! Holt left. Damn it," Dodger quickly stood up and lost his balance. "I was supposed to see which way he went."

"Huh? That serious looking guy with the leather jacket? He and his friends left a while ago," Iron said as he blinked through bleary eyes.

"I lost track of him," Dodger sighed, disappointed with himself.

"Yeah, I saw them get into Atticus' truck and they drove off together. There was a big moose, a dog, and a duck riding in the back of the truck, too," Iron added, barely able to

stand stably on his legs. Dodger squinted hard at Iron, unable to process the nonsense he had just said. Surely, Iron was spouting some drunk nonsense.

“Wait, what? Atticus? From the station? What was he doing with Holt and those other guys?” Dodger steadied himself by setting his hand on a picnic table.

“No clue, but Atticus has been gone from the station a lot over the past two weeks. He seem to be real busy doin’ stuff,” Iron waved to Clementine for something. He stumbled his way over to her just as Karn stood up. Karn set his arm over Dodger, leaning heavily on him, almost knocking him over.

“Hey, look, Dodger, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to leave like that last night. I felt real bad, you know?” Karn whisper shouted toward Dodger. It had been a while since Dodger had seen him this drunk.

“It’s no big deal. We’re buddies, right?” Dodger tried to sound cool but he could hear the slurring of his own words as if echoing back to him from a distance.

“Shhh, because I don’t want Bull to hear me. You know, I got fff... fucked up on purpose tonight. You know, because Bull doesn’t tolerate drinking. So they’d leave me behind. You know?” Karn muttered, stumbling over his words.

“What do you mean? Were you all going to see Bull?” Dodger squinted hard, unable to focus his vision on Karn’s face.

“We aren’t supposed to tell anyone. We have to hide it. You know. We have to protect the folks in town. We got

such good people here. You know. And women and kids. We gotta protect them,” Karn said as he leaned in closer to Dodger, his breath heavy with the odor of Winter Water.

“What? What is he hiding?” Dodger suddenly sobered up a fraction as his eyes widened.

“I just, you know, I didn’t want you to be mad at me. I had to tell you. I love you, you know,” Karn sighed as he looked up with weary, heavy eyes toward Dodger.

“Yeah, I love you too, buddy. You’re like a brother to me,” Dodger replied.

“Yeah... of course. Like a brother. That’s real cool,” Karn said, a hidden pain pulling at the corners of his desperate smile. “Just... I didn’t want you to hate me. I had to tell you the truth.”

“Come on. Why would I hate you? We’re buddies,” Dodger put his arm around the little old man and gave him a reassuring shake. “But... You’re all working with Bull to hide something? What is it he’s hiding?”

“Well, I’ll say what. I can drink as much as I want and talk about whatever I want. What’s Bull gonna do to me, huh? It’s not like he’s gonna shoot me,” Karn boasted, sticking his chest out as he poured his drink into his mouth.

“Bull shot Bone Grizzly back in the 70s,” Dodger said bluntly. With the sound of a fire hydrant bursting, Karn spat out his entire drink, nearly quenching the bonfire. His eyes went wide as he looked to Dodger in shock.

With a startling jump, a hand reached from out of the darkness, grabbing Dodger's shoulder. Dodger flinched, instinctively throwing his arms up to defend himself. He turned around in fright to see a familiar face, though it was much blurrier than usual.

"Oh, hi Dodger! Hi Karn!" Fort said with a friendly laugh.

"Uhh... hey kid," Dodger said, trying to get back onto his train of thought. With a tense, confused look, Fort sniffed the air.

"Hey, is there cake here? Something smells really good," Fort said, looking around.

"No! There's no cake," Dodger said, frustrated that he couldn't get his thoughts together.

"I know. I been smelling cake all night too. It don't make no sense," Karn said with a wild look on his face.

"Oh, anyway Dodger, it's such a weird a coincidence meeting you here. I kept thinking of you today for some weird reason," Fort said, furrowing his brow.

"What? Coincidence? You're late. You were supposed to be here hours ago," Dodger said, squinting hard at Fort.

"What are you talking about?" Fort laughed, trying to make eye contact with Dodger. Fort held his camera in his hand as his face scrunched with a look of confusion. "I was just gonna snap a few photos of folks at the bonfire."

“You were supposed to meet me here after you saw Dr. Allerdyce’s map,” Dodger said sternly, his voice growing stronger and more frustrated by the second.

“I... what? I was supposed to look at... Dr. Allerdyce’s map?” Fort looked up to the sky, his eyes darting back and forth as he desperately searched his memory.

“Yeah, did you see it? What did you see?” Dodger asked with excitement.

“Oh... God... I can’t remember,” Fort gasped with horror. A bitter chill ran through his body as the realization came to him.

“What the hell? So you just forgot?” Dodger grunted with frustration.

“I didn’t just forget... Now that you bring it up, I remember now... I was supposed to look at the map. I did. I saw the map,” Fort explained, his eyes widening with intensifying horror.

“Then what happened?” Dodger asked.

“I didn’t forget! I know I saw the map. But... It feels like... my memory just got erased.”