

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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Chapter 14

As Fort gripped his head in pain, his camera slipped out of his hands. Despite the camera being just outside of Karn's peripheral vision, Karn whipped his hand out, blindly catching the falling camera with impossible precision. After a moment, his head sluggishly turned, his eyes barely open, to see what it was he had caught. Dodger rubbed his eyes to see if he had really seen what had just happened. After all the years Dodger had known Karn, this wasn't the first time Dodger noticed Karn's reflexes.

"Slap me silly! Sorry, I maybe had too much to drink. I almost missed that," Karn slurred his speech as he stared hard at the camera.

"Thanks for that. Sorry. I... hit my head somehow at the doctor's office. There was a bright flash of light after I saw the map," Fort closed his eyes tightly as he rubbed the side of his head. Dodger gritted his teeth hard as one lead after another slipped through his hands. Iron made him drink far more than he wanted to, he lost track of Holt and the other people who seemed to be planning something with Bull, and now Fort had lost their chance at finding out where Sparro might be taking camping supplies to. Dodger wanted to interrogate Fort further but suspected Karn might try to derail his line of questioning, considering Karn seemed to be under Bull's control somehow.

“I gotta piss a gallon. Where’s your bathroom?” while munching on a bag of Cheesy Moose Antlers, Iron stumbled back toward Dodger, nearly tripping over the ever dwindling stack of firewood by the bonfire.

“Oh, yeah. Me too. Here, we go over by the back fence. Come on, I’ll show you,” Karn handed the camera back to Fort before stumbling away from the light of the fire. With Karn gone, Dodger saw his chance to talk to Fort.

“You uh... you alright?” Dodger leaned in close to Fort, trying to remember something he had lost track of over the course of drinking all night.

“Yeah, my head’s just a bit sore. I’m really sorry, Dodger. I don’t know what happened. I’m sure I saw the map. I just... all the details are gone. I’m drawing a blank,” Fort sighed, avoiding Dodger’s eyes in embarrassment.

“Are you sure you can’t remember anything you saw? A name of a road? A lake? A river? A mountain? Anything?” Dodger was far too drunk to hide the frustration in his voice.

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I really let you down. You must be pretty pissed off with me, huh?” Fort flinched as he turned away from Dodger.

“It’s... alright. Don’t worry about it, kid. I’m sure you really tried,” Dodger sighed, gently patting Fort on the back. With that gesture Fort turned and looked at Dodger with surprise, expecting some other kind of reaction. On Dodger’s face, Fort could see a well worn, hard practiced look of fatherly patience and understanding that must have taken years to refine; a kind of expression that Fort had never seen

for himself before. “No need to stress about it. We’ll find another lead somewhere else.”

“Whoa, it smells like cake over here too! Weird!” Karn exclaimed from the corner of the yard, far out of the light of the bonfire.

“Wherever they are, Bull needs two-way radios to communicate. The doctor had... some lady there trying to repair a broken radio I think,” Fort said as the soft light of the blaze ignited something behind his eyes. “Whoa, how did I even remember that?”

“Lady? Do you know who she was?” Dodger’s eyes widened at the promise of finding another lead to follow.

“No, but the Doctor mentioned her name once. Said her name was Helen. I’m... having a hard time drawing a picture of her face though,” Fort said, looking up at the starry sky as if his missing memories were stored somewhere up there.

“Holy shit. You have pretty good memory,” Dodger couldn’t help but express genuine surprise.

“I’m telling you, I’m good at remembering things. It’s just... something weird happened. I can’t explain it,” Fort stared down at his open palm, trying to recall something he knew he needed to keep track of. “Hey, what do you think we’ll see when we find Bull’s supposed campsite?”

“I don’t know,” Dodger gazed deep into the fire, thinking of all the people who had stopped showing up to their jobs over the past week. His friend, Bear, had left for a

hunting trip two weeks ago and still had not returned; just about the same time Falcon Allerdycce had disappeared.

“I think I need a soda. Be back in a sec,” Fort hung his camera around his neck as he made his way toward Clementine around the other side of the bonfire. Dodger watched the ever swirling ground just in front of his boots. He had become lost in a dizzying daze when he heard a meek, crackling voice behind him.

“Oh, sorry! Sorry! I’m really late, huh? Did I miss out on coffee? Is everyone already gone?” Willie Belgrade nearly tripped as he made his way over to Dodger’s side.

“Oh, Willie. Uhh...” Dodger struggled to collect his thoughts as he realized he forgot he had promised to meet Willie for coffee.

“Oh, brother. I was reading this new book from Cap Caster, really great stuff. It’s about this detective who is chasing after this serial murderer who is kidnapping people from this small seaside town and holding them captive in this deep hole out in the woods somewhere. And more and more people in town keep going missing. I guess I fell asleep while I was reading it. By the time I woke up, it was already night!” Willie trailed off as his eyes lit up. “Oh, hey, cool, a bonfire. Are we having a beer?”

“Yeah, why not? Nothing else to do tonight,” Dodger sighed.

“Whoa. Godamn. What happened to your eye?” Iron’s words slurred as he took unsteady steps to return to his seat, his eyes fighting back against a sweet, swirling intoxication.

“Hey, Willie’s sensitive about that,” Dodger just about jumped to his feet as he saw Willie put his hand up to the scar on his face and shrank into his shirt. His face ran hot and red with embarrassment. “Willie, this is our buddy, Iron. He didn’t mean nothin’ by it. We’ve had a few drinks tonight. Iron’s a good guy. You met him before?”

“Oh. Well, if Dodger says you’re a good guy then he must be right. Nice you meet you, Iron. I’m Willie,” Willie smiled and held his hand out.

“One of Dodger’s buddies, huh? Put ‘er there, brother,” Iron said heartily with a belch as he reached out and failed repeatedly to shake Willie’s hand. “Fuck it. Let’s take a rain-check on that.”

“Whoa, wait a second. Dodger! What happened to your hand?” Willie exclaimed as he reached forward and grabbed Dodger’s left hand. The stitching on Dodger’s hand had become exposed after the bandage got cake all over it earlier in the night.

“Well, funny thing last night,” Dodger stared Willie deep in his eye as he carefully picked his words. “We went onto Bull’s property last night. We got attacked by a cougar,” Dodger spoke slowly, fighting back the slurring of his words as he closely watched Willie’s reaction.

“Oh, good gravy! I told you guys to not go there,” Willie trembled as his left hand rose up of its own will to feel the eye patch on his face. “The Brandish property is dangerous! Nobody should ever go there!”

“Here now, you’re all riled up. Have this Expired Dynamite,” Karn wobbled back to the group and handed Willie a mixed drink. The ice barely had a chance to hit the side of the glass before Willie downed the entire drink. Karn’s jaw hung low with surprise as he handed Willie his own drink and said, “Well, slap my tallywhacker. I think you need this one more than I do.” Willie downed the second drink just as fast.

“Willie, I’ve never asked you about your eye. That’s your business. But folks around town are going missing. Rauno, Tira and I nearly got killed last night. I got to thinkin’ Bull’s got something to do with it. If you ever were gonna say how you lost your eye, may as well say it tonight,” Dodger grunted, the overpowering scent of liquor dripping from out of his moustache. Perhaps it was the frustration of Fort missing out on reading the map, or maybe it was the number of drinks Dodger had lost count of. He never imagined he would ever ask Willie about his eye.

“It was a long time ago, alright? I don’t want to talk about it. I was camping with Bull one night. We were probably only about thirteen or fourteen at the time. It was the 70’s. It was... a cougar. It attacked us. It killed Johan Baconsmith too. And took Bull’s granddad’s arm. There were even other kids there too, but I don’t remember ‘em,” Willie trembled as he clenched his hand tightly. Clementine seemed to peek from over the fire to watch the scene unfold. She handed a drink to Fort to carry over to Willie.

“Shit. Are you serious? My... dad, Hank, he was there that night on the property. He used to cut trees for Bill Brandish. My dad used to tell me stories about what happened that night. Said something weird... like a bigass

skinny long bear attacked,” Iron’s eyes widened as he, for the first time, witnessed any kind of corroboration of his father’s stories. “He called ‘em monsters. I figured he was just tellin’ a fun story.”

“No! There ain’t no such thing as monsters!” Willie yelled out, his face turning as red as the bonfire. He took the drink that Fort had brought over for him and glared hard at Iron. “It was... a cougar. It was just a normal everyday animal that attacked us.” Willie poured the third drink down his throat as Dodger watched in shock. He had never seen Willie drink so fast before.

“It couldn’t have been a cougar. My dad called it a bear. You calling my dad a liar?” Iron grumbled as he stumbled to get to his feet, wobbling as he steadied himself and stared Willie down.

“Well he must be lying, because I didn’t see no bear that night. And I don’t give a shit what Bull or anyone says! It wasn’t no monster! It was a cougar and if you say I’m lying then I’ll clean your clock, fella!” Willie’s eyes burned with unseen fire as the muscles in his arms prepared for a fight. In all the years Dodger had known Willie, this was the first time he had ever seen Willie express any kind of anger.

“My dad wasn’t a liar!” Iron roared like an animal, his voice echoing off the fence walls around them. Dodger went wide eyed as he watched Iron clench his fists, glistening with rage. As Iron swung his arm forward, a tear trickling from his eye shimmered in the flickering light of the fire. It was too much for Dodger to process. He had never seen Willie get into any disagreement or argument with anyone before. Yet here

he was, the most mild-mannered man Dodger knew was about to exchange punches with a man who had earlier in the evening lifted Karn up from the ground with just a single hand.

For that brief moment, as the two men's fists crossed each other, lashing out with drunken rage, a judicious wind whipped the bonfire nearly out of existence. Dodger couldn't comprehend what was happening, nor could he do anything to stop the two men from hitting each other. He had enjoyed far too many drinks that night to react fast enough to help. Instead, he watched in horror as Iron's fist lunged forward, directed straight toward Willie's jaw. It was clear this was far from Iron's first brawl, which couldn't be said for Willie.

Just as the bonfire flickered out from some force of wind, a deafening crunching of gravel rose up from the ground like a tidal wave. Dust filled the air as shadows leaped up from the night, grabbing the fighting men, freezing them in place. The punches had been thrown. Everyone in the backyard stared in utter shock. The fight had ended faster than it had begun.

No, it wasn't shadows that held Iron and Willie in place. Just as the bonfire gently, ever so slowly, whimpered back to life, it became clear what had happened. There, standing in the middle of two men, with tightly clenched hands and arms outstretched stopping both punches, was Karn Delance. Both Iron and Willie's faces were stunned with bewilderment. The returning fire light cast an otherworldly glow on Karn's look of disgust and fury. He gritted his teeth as he inadvertently looked down to lock eyes with Dodger who wasn't sure he even recognized Karn at all.

In each of his hands, he tightly gripped the arms of Iron and Willie, holding them with such force that neither man could pull their arm back even an inch, no matter how hard they tried. The ground below Karn's feet was bare dirt. All gravel had seemingly been swept away by some forceful wind.

"The fuck is wrong with you two?" Karn grunted, his words harsh and course. The sound of his age wore heavily on his voice. "Why would you go and do something stupid like that?" Dodger could hear the pain that Karn was fighting hard to hide behind his gritted teeth. Without moving his body, Karn turned his head and released Willie's fist. "Whatever happened to you back then, it's done. It can't hurt you anymore, so you're wasting your time hiding it and protecting it. Lying to yourself takes up all the energy and life you got. You need that energy to tread water. If you use up all that energy, you'll drown, and ain't no one can swim for you."

Willie dropped his gaze toward the ground in shame as his lips trembled. His hands shook with fear as he realized what could have just happened.

"And you, Iron. A man don't you what you did for no reason. I ain't stupid. I can see it somewhere deep behind your eyes, you're hurt. You're hurt real bad in the way no kind of laughing can cover up. But you know what they say when life knocks you off your horse," Karn said firmly, releasing his grip on Iron's fist.

"Get back up on the horse?" Iron answered sheepishly, looking away in shame.

"No. You take that horse to the glue factory and then you get into arts and crafts. Stop trying to ride a horse that

don't want you sittin' on it!" Karn grunted roughly, the hardest and loneliest years of his life now apparent in his voice. Dodger watched in awe, hearing a voice he had never heard before from a man he wasn't sure he ever even knew at all. Karn relaxed his shoulders, returning to his normal, modest stature. "A man with a broken heart hurts himself on purpose, and hurts other people by accident. Whether you like it or not, you're here now and you're one of us. If you go around lashin' out, we're the ones who will get caught up in the hurtin'."

"I'm sorry, Karn," Iron whimpered, his shoulders drooping miserably.

"Don't say sorry to me. I don't give a shit. I don't want apologies and I don't need 'em," Karn grunted back, looking toward Willie.

"Uh... I'm sorry I said what I said about your dad, Iron," Willie said after clearing his throat.

"I'm sorry I was such an asshole," Iron said, finally able to focus his vision on Willie's face. "I just... I don't know. I'm just a fuckin' mess, man. I'm sorry."

"I shouldn't have gotten so hot under the collar," Willie said, extending his hand forward.

"You were really gonna punch me out, weren't you? You know, you're a pretty tough son of a bitch, Willie," Iron smirked as he gave Willie a firm handshake. "I'm glad to meet ya. Dodger's got some tough pals."

"Aw, shucks," Willie blushed, trying to hide his smile. "Here, let me get the next round of drinks," Willie beamed as he walked over to Clementine to make an order.

Karn rubbed his aching back as he dropped himself down onto his chair next to Dodger. He hung his head as if weighed down by some unseen force.

“Hey, Karn, you alright?” Dodger leaned in close and tried to whisper, but he was at the point he could no longer control the volume of his voice.

“Don’t worry about me. I just got a lot on my mind too, like everyone else,” Karn sighed, relaxing his muscles.

“I never seen ya like that before,” Dodger nudged Karn with his elbow.

“It’s just... you ever stare in the face of something ugly, something unfair for so long, you start to wonder if what you’re doing even matters?” Karn looked Dodger in the eyes, accidentally revealing some hurt that had been hiding below the surface of his sunny attitude.

“I don’t know,” Dodger mumbled.

“You get sick of seeing the bad in the world, you know? Despite all the good you think you’re doing every day, nothing seems to change. More of those damn monsters come pouring out of the woods day after day and you wonder if you’re even making a difference,” Karn’s words slurred heavily as he set his head on Dodger’s shoulder. “I just want to see something beautiful, you know? I’m sick of the fighting. I just... want a moment of something beautiful to hold on to. Something I can hold with my hands and see with my eyes. What Bull wants... that ain’t me, you know?”

“What? What does Bull want you to do?” Dodger asked, nudging Karn.

“If the world had more people like you, it’d be a much better place,” Karn closed his eyes and subconsciously set his hand on Dodger’s forearm. He sighed deeply, releasing some breath he had been holding in for the past two weeks.

“Can you tell me where Bull’s camp is?” Dodger leaned in close and whispered.

“Dunno. I was supposed to share a ride with the others tonight,” Karn’s voice trailed off into a distant slumber as his head spun like a carousel, the world totally out of his control. Dodger couldn’t bring himself to wake up the old man who had fallen asleep on his shoulder. Yet, somewhere in the back of Dodger’s mind, he couldn’t stop asking himself how Karn was able to stop Iron and Willie from punching each other. How was Karn able to move so fast? Maybe Dodger was just too drunk and didn’t see what really happened.

Iron couldn’t stop himself from openly staring at Karn, who had fallen asleep on Dodger’s shoulder. Iron’s eyes glowed with bittersweet admiration and some degree of jealousy, wondering what it must be like to have a friend he could be that close with. The closest he ever got to anyone was when his wife would slap his face for whatever reason she could come up with to be angry at him. Iron never had the chance to form the kind of friendships Dodger had because Iron’s wife never let him invite friends over to the house. Yet, something Karn had said stuck in his mind. Karn said Iron was there now, and he was one of them. Perhaps things would be different from then on. If only he was allowed to dream of such a thing.

Dodger was on the very edge of closing his eyes when a tall, wiry figure stumbled unsteadily toward him, blocking the light of the fire.

“Hey. Hey, Dodger. Can you drive? How many drinks have you had?” Slim’s warbling voice brought Dodger to his senses with a startling jump.

“Huh? Uhh... I dunno, man. Twelve? Sixteen maybe?” Dodger’s voice drifted away from him without his control.

“Oh, shit. That’s more than me. Okay, who here has had less than Dodger,” Slim called out, his voice cracking.

“Not me,” Iron said, sipping on another Expired Dynamite.

“I’ve only had four. Why?” Willie said as he clinked his glass against Iron’s.

“Fuuuuuuuuck. I’m dying for some hash browns and gravy. If I don’t get to the Frying Saucer and get some hash browns and gravy, I’m actually going to die,” Slim exclaimed, his hands flapping out into the air.

“Hey, I could go for something to eat. All I’ve eaten all day is cake,” Dodger heard his detached voice say.

“I knew it! So there *was* cake!” Karn snapped to life like a firecracker being lit. “Where is it!?”

“Hey, Willie. You got the low score tonight. Drive us to The Frying Saucer,” Slim’s voice creaked as he leaned in close toward Willie.

"I heard that, fellas! You ain't drivin' nowhere, and you *know* I can stop you," Clementine shouted from across the fire.

"Hey, Fort. You haven't been drinking. How many seats you got in your car," Dodger called out with closed eyes into the open air as he sank deeper and deeper into his lawn chair.

"I got an SUV so I can fit seven passengers. Why? How many people are we driving?" Fort asked as he sipped on his Moose Juice soda.

"Fffff... fuck, I dunno, twenty of us, I think," Dodger's words blended together as he struggled to roll himself onto his feet while Karn held his arm, trying to get Dodger to help him stand up.

"Twenty? Jeez man, are you alright?" Fort asked as he counted the people standing around. "Don't worry about it, Clementine. I'll drive. I'm pretty hungry too, now that I think about."

"Hey, Iron, too bad you didn't play pool when Dodger was at his best. You wouldn't believe what a shot he is," Karn grinned, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Iron took a sip from his drink and looked away to hide his embarrassment, knowing that he didn't deserve to win the game of pool the night before. "Here, show him, Dodger. Do the thing with the horseshoe."

"Shit, I can hardly see straight," Dodger mumbled, his eyes barely open, as Karn handed him a horseshoe. "That horseshoe pole is all the way across the yard. It's gotta be..."

what, at least twenty-five yards away. I can't even see it from here."

"You know where it is. Come on, throw it! Show Iron," Karn clapped with delight as his eyes lit up.

Dodger belched as he squinted in Clementine's direction. Relying entirely on muscle memory, Dodger set his body on auto pilot. He looked at Iron from the corner of his eye. After having so many drinks, Dodger felt it'd be alright to show off just a little bit. He knew he would be going against the morals his friend and mentor, Honard Hall, had worked so hard to instill in him. But surely, it would be okay to show off to impress a friend every now and then, right? Besides, he knew how much Karn loved to watch his trick shots.

The group of faces dimly lit by the dying campfire all held their breath as Dodger effortlessly swung his arm forward, letting the horseshoe loose into the air. A silent wind blew through the backyard as the horseshoe disappeared into the night. No sound. A second passed. Still nothing. Had Dodger finally gotten so drunk he actually missed a horseshoe toss? Another second passed. Silence. Then.

Ding!

The crowd of locales erupted into riotous cheers and applause.

"No way!"

"Holy shit!"

"That's a ringer!"

“Did you see that!?”

Dodger turned his back, looking as cool and nonchalant as he possibly could, shrugging as if he didn't care. From the corner of his eye, he saw Iron nodding with bewilderment.

“Alright folks, let's mosey on over to the diner and get some food,” Dodger said as he struggled to manually pilot his legs.

After much prodding, Fort wrangled up the herd of Dodger, Karn, Willie, Slim, Iron, and Gus into his SUV, leaving behind a handful of locals who still wanted to sit by the bonfire. During the drive over to the diner, a song from the old country band, The Wranglers, played over the radio. With windows down and the night wind flowing through their hair, the men sang along with melancholic nostalgia for a decade long gone. It seemed they all knew the words to the song, “Watching The Storm”, despite them all singing different verses at the wrong times.

Before they knew it, they arrived at the diner with much cheering and laughter. They piled into the dimly lit diner as a familiar bell chimed out overhead. A couple of people were already seated in the diner for a late dinner or coffee, but Dodger was having too much fun to notice who else was there. The men dragged a table next to a booth so they could all sit together.

“Well, look at all ya'll sugar sweet boys! Can I get you started with a coffee?” Shelly Anne Piper called out from behind the counter. Her faded hair, silver eyes, and tie dye bandana told the story of a free spirit who had enjoyed everything the 70's had to offer, and was possibly born a

decade too late. She wore a simple, gentle smile with no hard edges or complications.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Please!”

“I’d love a coffee!”

“Oh, uh, Shelly. Can I have one of my specialty coffees please?” Willie called out meekly as he was barely able to make himself audible over the hootin’ and hollerin’ of the other men.

“Don’t you worry, Willie. I see you there. I’ll get your Ritmo for you,” Shelly Anne waved back with a bright yellow cloth. Dodger’s ears perked up as he heard the mention of Ritmo coffee, but he felt too modest to ask to have one, as he knew how rare and hard to get it was. The men settled down as an old rock and roll song played over the loudspeaker.

“Oooh! *Downstairs French Kiss*, 1969, from *Broken Bullets* by The Pennytraders. I love this song!” Karn pumped his fist in the air as a sweet electric guitar riff filled the building.

“Yeah, man! Rock on, this is good stuff,” Gus said as loudly as his calm, reserved voice would let him. He put his arm around Karn’s shoulder as they sang along to the song.

Dodger eventually noticed a faraway, forlorn look on Slim’s face and couldn’t help but ask what was wrong. Slim sniffled before looking out the window and answering.

“It’s just... so sad, you know? That girl in the wheelchair. Kathelynn. She really loved my stories, you know? But to her, that’s all they are, and all they’ll ever be. I been all over the world, I seen a lot of things, maybe too many things, and it’s because I got legs. I can go wherever I want. And when I was in the Airforce, I flew, man. I had wings. Real wings. But Kathelynn... she’ll be stuck in that chair for the rest of her life. She’ll never get to have the adventures the rest of take for granted,” Slim sighed, setting his head down on his folded arms as he gazed out the window toward an empty night.

“Don’t be like that,” Dodger nudged Slim with his elbow. “She tries real hard to stay cheery, you know.”

“I know. But you didn’t see the look on her face when I talked about going on camping trips, sitting out under stars in the wilderness, huddled around a campfire with your buds, cooking up fresh caught fish. Ain’t no soul around but you and the animals. She said she had never been camping before, but she looked so happy listening to my stupid, useless stories,” As Slim spoke, the other men at the table couldn’t help but quiet down and listen. It was not often Slim couldn’t be seen laughing like there were no problems in the world.

“Maybe those stories mean a lot to her,” Dodger said, but Slim cut him off with a scowl.

“Godamnit, that’s all I can do! Talk bullshit! I can’t do anything to actually help her or make her life better. It’s just not fair. Why’s someone like her gotta suffer while the rest of us assholes get to stomp around free of charge?” Slim slammed his fist down on the table, bringing a heavy silence down upon the entire building.

“Maybe your stories are helping her?” Dodger asked, a bit afraid of Slim’s utter change of character.

“If I really could help her, I’d take her on adventures. I’d take her on a real camping trip and cook a real campfire meal, and maybe... for a little while, maybe I could make her believe that wheelchair won’t stop her from living the best life she possibly could,” Slim gritted his teeth with grinding tension as a tear of rage and frustration fell from his eye. “But that’d be creepy, you know? Inappropriate. I’m just some random old guy from the bar. I couldn’t even bring up the idea of a camping trip without looking like that freak, Eli. You know what he did back in the 90’s to those kids. I wouldn’t want some town posse coming to hunt me down.”

The men sitting at the table looked down, unable to look each other in the eyes. That entire night they had been laughing and drinking without a care in the world, all the while Slim had been hiding this pain behind a smile he had no choice but to wear.

“It wouldn’t look creepy or inappropriate if it was a group camping trip, would it?” Dodger asked, patting Slim on the back.

“What? What do you mean?” Slim asked, sniffing as he wiped his nose.

“Well, sure. Let’s ask a few folks around town. I’m sure Clementine would be happy to join in too if you explained it to her. Hell, you can count on me to be there too,” Dodger said reassuringly as he shook Slim by his shoulder.

“Really? You’d really help me do that?” the light returned to Slim’s eyes as a great smile stretched across his face. “Do you have any idea how happy that will make that little lady? That’s so swell of you, Dodger!”

Another old rock and roll song played over the loudspeaker as the men at the table resumed their laughter and conversations, planning out when and where they could have the camping trip. Shelly Anne took their orders as Fort showed Iron photos on his camera. Eventually, Fort came across images of brilliant blue butterflies perched on bright green blades of grass.

“Hey, that’s an Eastern Tailed-Blue. *Cupido Comyntas*. That’s pretty rare. My uncle, Dan, used to say it’s good luck if you ever see one. Those are great pictures,” Iron furrowed his brow in awe.

“Thanks. I must have a lot of luck then. I know this meadow where I tend to find them,” Fort said, copying Dodger’s tone, trying to sound distant and cool.

“You serious? You know where to find these? My uncle always wanted to catch one to put in a frame,” Iron grinned as he quickly glanced over to see Dodger who was vaguely listening in on their conversation. Dodger gave a subtle nod. Iron looked back at the photo on the camera with a sharp, clear look in his eyes. “Would you take me there sometime? I’d love to catch one.”

“Hey, yeah. That’d be fun. I’ve been meaning to go back there for more photos sometime soon anyway,” Fort said excitedly. He glanced back at Dodger for a brief second before calming down and making a pouty, nonchalant face. “I mean,

yeah, sure, whatever. That'd be cool. I don't even care, man. Whatever." Dodger squinted hard at Fort, seemingly unimpressed with Fort's impersonation.

"Hey, Fort, what do ya got written on your hand there? Is it a girl's phone number?" Iron poked roughly at Fort's hand.

"Oh, huh. Weird. I don't know. There's three words," Fort stared down hard at his hand as his head began to throb.

"Angel"

"Pasca"

"Star"

"What do you think that means?" Iron scratched his beard as he removed his hat and set it on the back of his seat.

"I don't know," Fort gritted his teeth as a terrible pounding filled his head, as if something were trying to stop him from recalling some memory. "Pasca... Isn't a word."

"Well, Angel and Star are words, but if Pasca is short for another word, it's possible Angel and Star are also part of bigger words," Willie said as he lightly grabbed Fort's hand to read it more quickly. "This is fun. I love puzzles. You guys always get up to such fun stuff."

"Pascagoula Meadow," Dodger blurted out, seemingly without him even thinking about it.

"Oh, neat. You must like puzzles too. We should start a club where we can solve puzzles as a team!" Willie beamed as he excitedly slapped his open palms on the table.

But why did Dodger say that?

“Well I do a lot of photography around Pascagoula Meadow. I guess that means Angel might mean Angel Lake. It’s a mile or two away.” Fort said, his vision and mind becoming increasingly clear.

“That leaves the word Star. Logically, Star should be the name of a location as well if it follows the pattern of the other two words,” Willie deduced, poking Fort’s open palm curiously.

“Could mean Starlight Rock. It’s easy to get to from the road. It’s been known as a spot for people to jump off of to commit suicide,” Gus said softly, looking out the window, far, far off to some place beyond the warm light of the diner. Dodger watched Gus’ expression, trying to read exactly what he was thinking.

“So what do those places mean? Why’d you write it on your hand?” Dodger asked, trying hard to sober up and failing.

“Dodger! What if this is what I saw on Dr. Allerdycy’s map?” Fort said excitedly. Dodger’s heart skipped three beats as he leaned forward to get a close look at Fort’s hand.

Shelly Anne stepped up to the table with a handful of mugs and a fresh pot of coffee. In front of Willie, she set down one mug already filled with coffee. Dodger could hear rhythmic drums in the distance as he caught a whiff of the Ritmo coffee. As Shelly Anne poured coffee for the fellows trying to solve Fort’s puzzle, she gasped with shock. “Dodger! Your hand! It’s bleeding!”

“He’ll be alright. It’s not as bad as it looks,” Karn said with a concerned look on his face, as if the words were leaving his mouth without his control. Dodger gave Karn a worried look as some distant memory called out to him.

“Dodger!” Iron stuttered, his face wretched with horror. Dodger met his gaze and returned the look. “Hey, Dodger. Have we been here before?”

Iron looked around at Karn and Gus’ faces, then at Shelly Anne who was wrapping paper towels around Dodger’s hand. Something about this situation felt uncomfortably familiar.

“Have we?” Dodger struggled to search his memory.

“Years ago. You and Sheriff Fred. You gathered up a posse. I joined you guys on some manhunt. We ended up here after you got hurt,” Iron stumbled through words that seemed to pour out of his mouth without his control.

“What!? You were there!? What do you remember?” Dodger shouted, clenching his hands into fists.

“Not much. I had been drinkin’ when you guys found me outside the gas station. I totally forgot about it. I don’t even know why it’s coming back to me now. Hell, we went to Pascagoula Meadow together. And then out in the desert there was this... fucked up three legged horse or something. It attacked us. You got hurt... and Bull and I dragged you back here,” Iron set his trembling hand over his mouth as if it would stop the words of horror from leaving his mouth.

Dodger melted into his seat, drinking in a cocktail of disbelief, horror, and a sense of relief from finally receiving

some answer to a question that had been clawing at the back of his mind for years.

“Shit. You were there, Karn. Remember? And Gus, you were there too. I think you guys had just been at a party or something. Y’all were more messed up than I was that night,” Iron looked around the room as if it would bring back any other memories. “And you, miss, you were working here that night too.”

“Uhh... no, it couldn’t be. I don’t remember that at all!” Shelly Anne quickly rushed away with the coffee pot in hand, refusing to make any eye contact.

“I still have nightmares about that night. That’s the night my nephew found out I was-,” Gus spoke, but his words were cut short by a set of hurried sneakers slamming against the tiled floor.

“Dodger! I’ve been looking for you,” Tira gasped, catching her breath.

“Oh, hey there, Tira. We was jes having a drink with the fellas here. What’s up?” Dodger asked, his vision too blurry for him to read Tira’s worried expression.

“Is Rauno with you? Have you seen Rauno today?” Tira asked hurriedly.

“No, haven’t seen him all day. Why?” Dodger shook his head, trying to sober up.

“He said he couldn’t stop thinking about that weird creature he saw in the steel mill. He said he was going back to check it out but he hasn’t come back yet.”