

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

Jerrel Dulay

Chapter XV

The men ate their meals while joking and laughing; all but Dodger who stared, burning a hole through the window with just his eyes. He slowly chipped away at his hash browns and gravy as he pondered what Rauno could have been thinking by going back to the steel mill. Surely, he was just fine. Rauno was a grown man; one of the strongest men Dodger knew. Besides, there was no such thing as monsters. Rauno would be fine.

The small bell above the entrance door chimed again and again, each time releasing another diner patron back out into the fog of the ever cooling night. One cup of coffee turned into three. Tira sat, watching the group from a distance, becoming increasingly impatient. She squinted through the hazy, amber light of the old diner as neon lights swirled all around the group of men having fun without a care in the world.

“Oh, hey, Gus, how is that guitar build going? I really want to surprise Jamie with my new guitar,” Willie asked, slowly pecking away at his hash browns.

“It’s... going alright, I guess. I’m just not real sure about those specs you gave me... I keep telling ya, I’ve never built any kind of instrument before,” Gus answered apprehensively, blushing as he hid behind his mug of coffee.

“You play guitar? That’s cool. I always wanted to try that but my wife... Well, why don’t you show me your guitar when it’s ready?” Iron asked excitedly.

“Oh, well, I’m more of a piano man, really. But you know our local folk band? Well, Jamie thinks it might be nice if we played a couple shows next month. He normally does rhythm guitar but there’s a few songs where we could use a second guitar. Well, I figured I could fill the spot, but I need a new guitar,” Willie answered with a mouth full of hash browns.

“Why don’t you check out Ling Ling’s music shop? She’s got a decent selection of guitars,” Slim said, shoveling gravy into his mouth.

“I did check there but none of the guitars worked well for me. See, I broke my hand a few years ago while I was trying to feed this big raccoon up in a tree and since then, I’ve had trouble forming some chord shapes. See, like this? Ouch!” Willie winced as he stretched his fingers across a syrup bottle like a guitar fret board. “So, I copied some old guitar designs and modified them to be a bit shorter and now good ol’ Gus here is building a custom guitar for me,” Willie said with a smile beaming across his face.

“What? How big was it?” Fort said, wide eyed.

“Huh? Oh, it’s probably about 80% the size of a common dreadnaught sized guitar,” Willie answered plainly.

“No, not that! The raccoon. Why were you even feeding it?” Fort said, finishing up the last of the food on his plate with a twisted look of confusion on his face.

“Oh, well, he was a cute little fella and he was just so adorable with his little face and little hands. I just had no choice but to make him a peanut butter and jelly and ham sandwich,” Willie sipped his coffee with a plain look on his face.

“Wait, how did you break your hand feeding a raccoon?” Slim coughed out, cocking his head to the side.

“What!? No, that’s not the interesting part. Why did you make an entire whole sandwich for the raccoon!?” Fort blurted out, exasperated.

“Now hold on, I want to hear about that guitar,” Iron chomped down on the last of his biscuits and gravy.

“See, that’s the interesting part. The guitar! So I based it on blueprints for an old Kecksburg Stratosphere acoustic from the 60’s, but instead of the standard sound hole, I asked Gus to put a nice big F hole in there,” Willie grinned, waving his hands around in the air to draw the shape of his guitar. He looked toward Karn, disappointed to see that the old man had fallen asleep with his head set down on the table. Dodger glanced heavily at the chatting men from the corner of his eye.

“Wait, why put an F hole instead of a standard sound hole in the guitar?” Fort squinted at Willie.

“You get much more projection and a brighter tone, while sacrificing some of the warmth and presence of the middle range. I’ll mostly use the guitar for lead and arpeggios so it’s perfect. I know it adds a bit more challenge to the build, but our Gus can build anything out of wood. You didn’t have

any trouble putting an F hole in that guitar, did ya, Gus?" Willie grinned, nudging Gus with his elbow.

"Uh... yeah... I, uh... just did exactly what you asked, no problem. But I'm telling you, I don't know anything about music or guitars. I don't know if the thing will work the way you expect it to," Gus slid down into his seat, his face glowing hot red with embarrassment.

"Hey, is everyone done eating? I wanna get back to the bar for another round of drinks before Clementine closes up shop," Slim chimed out with a fist pump into the air.

"No. I'm not going back to the bar," Dodger spoke out firmly, his voice rattling the glasses sitting on the far wall.

"What? But we're having a great time. It's too early to call it a night," Iron said, sighing with disappointment.

"I'm going to the old steel mill to find Rauno. Fort. Drive me." Dodger said, his voice as hard as a mountain.

"Yeah, sure, of course. I can do that," Fort answered quickly, rattled by Dodger's sudden stern attitude.

"What? Why's Rauno at the old steel mill at this time of night? And why do you gotta go there?" Slim asked, sipping the last of the coffee in his mug.

"He might be in trouble. I'm gonna make sure he's alright," Dodger answered abruptly, clearly having lost patience watching his friends laugh the night away. With that, a set of heavy footsteps slamming against the black and white tiles of the old diner approached the group.

“Did you say you’re going to the abandoned steel mill at the other end of town?” a tired, raspy voice reached out from behind Dodger. A man in his late 30’s or early 40’s, with eyes sunken deep from sleepless night, and teeth stained with coffee and cigarettes approached. He stood at the edge of the table. Beneath a dark purple cap, his long, scraggly hair hung in complete chaos over his dust covered jacket which matched the color of his cap. His clothes were covered in scuffs and scrapes and his knuckles were bruised. His face and fingers were covered in scratches.

“What’s it to you, partner?” Dodger stared back at the man, assessing what kind of threat he might pose.

“I heard you from across the room. Are you guys going to that old steel mill or not? Just answer,” the man asked, his voice hoarse and tired.

“Yeah. Why do you care?” Dodger grunted back.

“You can’t go there. It’s not safe,” the man answered, his eyes widening with borderline panic.

“Relax, guy. Some of us used to work at the mill before it shut down. We know what we’re doing,” Iron answered with hardened bravado while trying to back up Dodger.

“Then you guys know about the monster that’s in that old mill?” The man blurted out, losing all control of his voice. His voice echoed, bringing a hushed silence across the ever tiring diner.

“Wha-... what?” Slim gasped. “M... monsters!?”

“Yeah, you guys live in Silver Falls, right? So you have to know about them, right? There in the steel mill. I snuck in a few weeks back to see if I could find any clues and I saw it. You know, it was like... wolf sized, but it had no skin. It was just... like muscle and flesh. It had a featureless face, no teeth, empty eye holes. And arms... shit... it had arms sticking out all over its body in a way they had no business being there. You... know about those, right?” The man gritted his teeth and slammed his hand down on the table. Dodger froze, unable to process the information he had just heard.

“Listen, fella. I don’t know what you’re smoking, but we don’t got monsters in this town. Now, we got business to take care of. We’re looking for... Rauno, right? Dodger?” Iron stood up, towering with authority high over the frenzied out-of-towner.

“Ye... yeah. Let’s get a move on. No time to waste,” Dodger said, unable to take his eyes off the man who was raving about monsters.

“Hey, uh, Karn’s fallen asleep. I can’t get him to wake up,” Gus alerted the group as he watched Karn snore, oblivious to what was going on around him. Dodger grabbed Karn’s arm, accidentally pulling back his sleeve to reveal a brilliantly shimmering bracelet with a small crystal sculpture in a shape Dodger couldn’t fully recognize. For a few seconds, Dodger swore he could hear a deeply resonating hum from somewhere in the distance.

“I’ll carry him to the car,” Iron grunted as he picked up the little old man.

“Oh, uh, Shelly Anne! Can we get our bill squared away? We gotta run.” Willie waved to the Shelly Anne at the other end of the diner.

“I’m telling you guys! I’m serious! You can’t go to the steel mill. I seen it! A real monster! You don’t know what it could do to you!” the crazed man said, his hands twitching with frantic energy.

“Well. Fuck that. Ol’ Slim ain’t tanglin’ with no monsters. No way, no how. You guys can drop me off at the bar,” Slim said, his eyes red and wide with fright.

“Fine. Willie, can you take care of Karn and make sure he gets home alright?” Dodger said as he rifled through his wallet to pay the bill. The group shuffled out of their seats and made their way toward the cold fog of the night.

“Well, sure. I didn’t really want to go out to some creepy place like the old mill anyways,” Willie whimpered.

“I know,” Dodger replied.

“Hey, fellas. Sorry, I’d love to party with you more but I better head home. I told the ol’ ball and chain I wouldn’t be home too late. I don’t want to make Cooper worry,” Gus said softly, his voice almost getting lost in the bustle. Iron squinted hard at Gus and shook his head as if to clear the confusion that had filled his head. Surely he had heard Gus wrong.

“Dodger, hold on. I’m going with you guys,” Tira stated firmly, her hands clenched tightly.

“No need. It might be dangerous. Just head on home,” Dodger instructed, barely even giving Tira any eye contact.

“Not a chance. You guys are drunker than skunks, and you’re gonna go stumbling around in the dark? It’s my fault Rauno went to the mill... After the Brandish property, I just kept talking about what happened, asking him what he thought was going on. I should have stopped him when he said he was going back to the mill. Maybe I should have gone with him... But I can’t just leave it there. I’m going with you to make sure none of you trip and fall on a rusty spike at the very least,” Tira spoke firmly, her words forming a wall that Dodger had no way to climb.

“Uh, yeah, I’d feel a lot better if Tira came along. No offense, but you guys have had a lot to drink tonight and I can’t wrangle you all by myself,” Fort added meekly.

“Thank you, Fort. See? Someone who finally makes some sense,” Tira smiled, causing Fort to blush ever so slightly.

“Fine. Meet us at the front of the old mill. We need to drop these fellas back at the bar first,” Dodger said, struggling to focus his bleary eyes on Tira’s face. He nearly fell over as he turned around to make his way to the front door.

“Shit, this is gonna be a nightmare,” Tira sighed as she watched Dodger barely manage to pilot his legs out the front door into the icy night air.

“Relax, everything will probably turn out fine,” Fort shrugged.

“Do you honestly believe that?” Tira said with a dry look, rolling her eyes.

“Nope, but it’s better if you try to believe it anyway,” Fort said with a cool, distant voice as he turned and walked

out the door. As Tira left, the diner became cold, leaving the long haired man and Shelly Anne watching the group drive off in a cloud of smoke into the ever thickening dark of night.

A cloud of dust blinded Dodger as Fort's SUV rolled to a stop in front of a chain linked fence. The headlights reflecting off the dust blinded Dodger as Fort turned off the engine, leaving the group sitting in uncomfortable silence. After a moment's hesitation, listening as if waiting for something to happen, Dodger opened his door and stepped out into the night air that nipped at his face with razor sharp fangs.

Fort and Iron exchanged looks before following Dodger out into the infinite void of night. Tira stepped out of her car to meet them, pointing to their left. About 15 feet away was a pickup truck, parked haphazardly, leaning heavily on its side as if it could topple over at any minute. Before approaching Rauno's parked truck, Dodger examined their surroundings. The road stretched on behind them, curving and disappearing into a hungry darkness. Beyond the chain link fence stood multiple weary brick buildings, covered in vines and worn down from years of neglect. Rubble and piles of broken down cement walls, rusted metal poles and other debris formed a tetanus trap for anyone who didn't know how to safely navigate the property. The field of scattered and jagged refuse made it clear the steel mill was abandoned in a hurry, with not even a single clean-up crew returning once to reclaim anything that was worth salvaging. On the surrounding mountain walls, trees stretched overhead, reaching down toward the old steel mill buildings like greedy, hungry tendrils. The sound of a distance wind moaned far off in the distance, echoing through a low valley beyond the other side of the road.

“He... might be in there,” Dodger whispered, afraid of upsetting the delicate balance of the night. Iron and Tira stepped toward the truck cautiously as Fort stepped back, retreating toward the driver’s door of his own vehicle. Dodger’s heart slammed against his chest as he approached Rauno’s truck. The night wind swirled around his head with furious color. He lacked the presence of mind to even formulate what bad could possibly befall his old friend. Before he even looked in through the window, Dodger pulled open the passenger door to find Rauno slumped over in the passenger seat, his face pressed heavily against the dashboard. Rauno’s arms hung low at his sides. His body sat as motionless as the night.

“Oh, shit,” Tira muttered, holding her hands over her mouth in shock. Dodger reached up, driven by impulse, grabbing Rauno’s shoulder. With the cracking sound of bone slamming against hollow plastic, Rauno’s body lashed out in panic.

“*Kuole! Hirviö! Fuck!*” Rauno roared at the top of his lungs, his voice raspy and course, his throat sore with blood.

“Hey! Rauno! It’s alright! It’s okay! It’s me, Dodger,” Dodger grabbed his friend by his shoulder to calm him down. In Rauno’s eyes was the look of a grown man who had just felt true fear for the first time in his life.

“Oh, shit! Dodger! How did you... where are we?” Rauno coughed out, barely able to speak.

“We’re parked in front of the steel mill. Why are you so wound up? What happened?” Dodger asked, nearly falling over from having lost his balance.

“I... uh... I sat in my truck for hours, wondering if I should go in there, into the building. Well. It got dark. I finally decided to go in and... uh...” Rauno looked down and grabbed his chest as if driven by some instinct or memory. No, there was nothing out of the ordinary. No blood, no injury, or damage to his clothes.

“What!? What did you see?” Fort asked frantically as he stepped in close to join Iron and Tira.

“I... walked up the stairs. And... I don’t know. There was a bright flash of light, and then I don’t remember what happened next,” Rauno muttered, his throat clamping tightly as he struggled to search his memory for something that wasn’t there.

“What? What do you mean you don’t remember? Did you fall and hit your head or something?” Tira asked hurriedly.

“No. The next thing I know, I woke up here with you guys. I... don’t know what happened,” Rauno answered, his voice becoming increasingly panicked. Tears began to form in his eyes as he grinded his teeth.

“You have no idea how relieved I am that you’re alright. Well, now that we’re all good and safe, we can all go home. Come on, let’s go,” Tira smiled cheerfully as she waved and pointed back to the road.

“What the hell happened?” Dodger grunted as he tried and failed to make eye contact with Rauno.

“There was just a bright light. I can’t remember,” Rauno gasped as he brought his clenched fist to his mouth and bit down on the knuckle of his thumb. “I... can’t remember.” Dodger felt his stomach tangle up into knots as he watched his old friend of who knows how many years suddenly come apart at the seams, crying for what seemed like no reason at all. Dodger patted Rauno on the back, trying to comfort him, but it seemed to have no effect. The

sense of powerlessness over the situation, over his inability to help Rauno, was becoming a weight too heavy for Dodger to carry.

“Alright, I’m going in there. I’ll see what’s there and prove to you that monsters don’t exist. There’s nothing in there,” Dodger shouted as he turned his back, nearly falling over.

“Dodger! Don’t!” Tira called out.

“I’m going,” Dodger muttered as he stepped toward the chain link fence. The door had been left swinging wide open.

“Dodger! No! What about your wife? What will Karol do if something bad happens to you?” Rauno jumped out of his truck and exclaimed through his rattled throat. Dodger paused for a moment before turning back, his face hidden behind a terrible, deep shadow.

“Karol isn’t here anymore, is she!? She’s off living her own life now! Karol doesn’t need me anymore so who gives a fuck what happens to me!?” Dodger shouted at the top of his lungs. His jagged words echoed off the cold, hard mountain walls around them, leaving the group in stunned silence. With clenched fists, Dodger stepped through the gate and disappeared into the darkness.

“Well? We can’t let him go by himself. Let’s go,” Iron grunted as he patted Rauno on the back.

“I... can’t,” Rauno barely managed to say as his legs buckled beneath him. He grabbed the car door to catch himself from falling.

“What? Dodger’s going in there for your sake and you’re not even gonna go with him?” Iron’s face twisted into a look of disgust.

“I... don’t know why. My legs won’t let me. I can’t go in there,” Rauno struggled to stand, wiping tears from his tired eyes.

“Huh. And you’re supposed to be some kind of friend to Dodger? You’re nothing but a coward,” Iron scoffed, casting a

thundering gaze down upon Rauno before following Dodger toward the old buildings.

“Shit, those guys are so drunk. They’re gonna get themselves hurt. I gotta go with them,” Tira said before turning and running after Iron.

“Hey, you’re gonna be okay, right? Just wait back here and we’ll be back in a minute. I’ll go in there and convince Dodger to come back. Don’t worry about a thing,” Fort said as he helped Rauno get back into the passenger seat of his car.

“Fort! Be careful. I don’t know what exactly... but there’s something in there,” Rauno sighed, regaining his composure as he leaned back in his seat.

“What do you mean?” Fort asked with wide eyes.

“Remember the video you showed us? The creature in the basement?” Rauno said, his voice low and afraid.

“Oh shit. Oh man... Why’d you have to go and say that?” Fort clenched his fists as a shiver ran through his body. “Okay. Come on. I can’t afford to be scared. I already... failed Dodger twice. I should have gone with you guys last night to the Brandish property and Dodger ended up getting hurt. And after this morning, well, I swore to myself I wouldn’t fail Dodger again. So this is it. I’ve gotta go in there and help him and that’s all there is to it.” Fort stood tall with an unsteady grin on his face. “Just don’t do anything or go anywhere. We’ll be right back, no problem.”

Fort nearly slipped down a gravel driveway overgrown with weeds. Knife-like scraps of metal strewn out like a deadly garden as far as the eye could see reached up out of the ground, grasping at the dull, silver moonlight. He carefully watched where he stepped as he chased after Tira. Without even waiting for Fort, Tira stormed in through a rust covered door leading into an abandoned building.

Upon stepping through the doorway, the old door slowly creaked shut with a pitiful moan, leaving the four figures completely and utterly cut off from the rest of the world. Inside the building, the dank, heavy air pushed down on the lungs of the four who had charged into a pitch black hell with no regard or preparation. With a soft click, a delicate single strand of light gently reached out to push its way forward through the darkness, waving like a hand pushing a tree branch out of the way. In Tira's hand was a well worn metal flashlight; the only source of light between the four of them.

Dodger struggled to draw air into his lungs, fighting back against the dense atmosphere that clearly had no intention of welcoming any intruders. A mild scent of some dead animal wafted in from some unseen corner at the far end of the building.

"Well. Let's check the place out. Prove there's nothing in here," Dodger grunted, struggling to focus his eyes on the narrow beam of light that stretched out apprehensively through the milky darkness.

"Let me show you around. I used to work here before it shut down," Iron sighed, craning his neck around a doorway into a small office room. After seeing nothing of interest of the room, he signaled and walked toward a stairwell.

"Really? Were you here when the place shut down?" Tira gasped with surprise as she aimed her flashlight at the stairway.

"Yep. We rushed out in just one day. I never seen anything like it. They told us to drop everything where it was and just leave. Some of the guys tried to drag out any valuable equipment but for the most part, we grabbed whatever we could carry and walked right out," Iron said, a hint of bitter regret could be heard as his words subtly trembled.

"I heard rumors about that day. Why'd you have to abandon the place?" Fort asked, reaching to his hip to make sure his

hunting knife was still attached to his belt. He walked toward Iron, stumbling over some loose rope scattered across the dirt covered cement floor.

“No idea for certain. They said one of the guys found some weird black sphere somewhere on the property. Well, he got real sick. Radiation poisoning they said. He supposedly brought the sphere somewhere into the building. He fell into a coma so no one could ask him where it was. How much truth there is in that, I got no clue. Sounds like a bunch of hot air if you ask me,” Iron grunted, his resentment toward the events of that day many years ago becoming increasingly apparent. Dodger took a number of steps of the stairs before he slammed into some hard, metallic object. At that, Tira flicked her flashlight over to reveal Dodger barely managing to find his balance before falling off the stairs.

“Shit! What the hell this?” Dodger winced.

“It’s some kind of office desk,” Tira answered, examining the large piece of furniture that was lodged and twisted in such a way that no one could possibly navigate around it to climb up the stairs. Dodger strained as he wrapped his arms around the desk and tried to move it, failing to shift it even an inch.

“It’s heavier than hell,” Dodger gasped. “Hey, Iron, give me a hand, would ya?”

“No problem,” Iron joined Dodger, each man grabbing a side of the desk in an effort to move it out of the way. They pulled as hard as they could but the old metal thing barely shifted an inch.

“Hey, maybe we should just head back home. That thing looks way too heavy, right? There’s no way Rauno could have moved that by himself so he couldn’t have possibly gone farther into the building,” Fort reasoned in as calm a voice as he could.

“Nope. I’m going in there,” Dodger stated plainly, pulling ever harder on the old desk that refused to budge.

“Great. These guys are gonna hurt themselves,” Tira sighed, throwing her arms in the air with exasperation.

“Look, you guys will give yourselves hernias doing that. Step back for a second and let me do this,” Fort said with a hint of irritation in his voice. Using his hunting knife, he cut loose a section of the old rope that lied tangled across the floor. He dragged the rope up the stairs to the metal desk and tied a loop around of the table legs sticking up into the air. He handed the other end of the rope to Iron with a focused, sharp look in his eye. “Alright, Iron. Give that a try. You guys better get out of the way.”

Iron braced himself, grabbing the railing on the side of the stairway, wrapping the rope around his other hand. Within a second, a scraping of concrete and a deafening, thunderous crash, the stubborn old desk slammed down the stairs down to the bottom floor.

“Huh. That was easy,” Iron said with a look of surprise.

“Nice one, Fort,” Dodger said, dropping his agitated bravado in exchange for an impressed expression.

“Your brain is a muscle too, you know,” Fort said with as cool an attitude as he could manage. He stepped over the fallen desk and looked upward through the stairwell.

“Alright, let’s mosey on up,” Dodger commanded, walking up the stairs with minimal hesitation. His boots scraped against the loose debris all along the well worn steps.

“Well. It’s been nice knowing you guys. I’ve seen enough scary movies to know this is where we all get axe murdered,” Tira

sighed as she hung her head and followed Dodger, aiming her flashlight to light his path.

The four figures reached the top of the stairwell, kicking aside rotted out planks of wood and crumbling bricks. Each sound they made echoed painfully through the ever sprawling expanse of the building which continued to stretch on in front of them. Particles of dust flickered before their eyes, caught in the single thread of light shared between the four of them.

“Alright. That’s the showers to the left. Locker room up ahead. Door to the right leads to next building where we had the smelters,” Iron directed, his voice cutting sharply through the darkness.

“Hey, I think if there was anything here, we probably would have seen it by now. I mean, we can see the coast is clear, right? Seems like now’s a good a time as any to hit the ol’ dusty trail,” Fort said with a low, deep voice.

“I agree. Great idea. Let’s head back home,” Tira nodded, unable to stop Dodger from taking another step forward toward the locker rooms. He held his clenched fist up toward the others behind him.

“Hey, who’s back there? We aren’t here to hurt you,” Dodger called out toward the other end of the long locker room.

“What the hell!?” Fort whisper shouted as he retreated back toward the stairwell.

“No way. Look, there’s an axe here on the ground. Whoever is back there has to be an axe murderer, I’m telling you,” Tira whispered back, focusing her flashlight in the direction Dodger had shouted.

“Could be some homeless vagrant. The door was left unlocked,” Iron whispered as he huddled in close toward Dodger, momentarily blocking the light from Tira’s flashlight. For that brief moment of blinding darkness, the four figures felt the oppressing pressure of complete silence. A miserable scraping of rusted metal on the cement floor screeched up from the depths of hell, rattling Dodger right to his bones. He stumbled, trying to blindly catch his balance as he exhaled the heavy air in his lungs. Tira flinched as the bitter smell of alcohol in Dodger’s breath overwhelmed the stench of mildew and rotting wood of the building.

“This is a bad idea! We should leave!” Tira whisper shouted as she swung her arm to get around Iron.

“There was someone back there,” Dodger grunted back.

“A person? You saw a person?” Fort whimpered, the brave façade of his voice had cracked entirely through.

“Yeah. That’s probably who Rauno saw. Come on. Let’s go talk to ‘em,” Dodger said, moving forward with small steps.

The rattling of a tin can shot out from the other end of the locker room as Tira frantically flicked her flashlight left and right, searching desperately for the source of the sound.

“Hold it!” Dodger said, stopping abruptly in his tracks. Iron, Fort, and Tira huddled in close as the narrow beam of light, barely visible at the far end of the room, landed on the form of some figure with ever tightening resistance. There indeed was someone standing there in the far corner of the room.

“Sorry if we scared you. We just wanna talk,” Dodger said, his words slurring as the night’s drinks took their toll on him.

“Yeah, we’re just locals here. We won’t get you in any trouble or anything, so don’t worry. If you just want to come over and have a little chat,” Tira said with a soothing tone.

The figure slowly turned and looked straight toward the beam of light. Whoever it was standing there was too far away for the light to make clear any details on his or her face. They stood about the same height as Dodger. Without saying a word, the figure took a step forward, becoming ever so slightly more clear in the frail light. Was Tira’s light blinding them?

The figure put their hand up to shield their eyes from the light. With one step forward, there was a sigh of relief. There were no monsters after all. Dodger was about to clear up this whole situation and reassure his friend there was nothing to be afraid of.

The figure then put up their other hand to shield their face from the light. With another step forward, the figure smiled, probably relieved to meet what seemed like a friendly group of people.

The figure then put up their third hand to shield their face as it took a faster, bigger step forward, approaching the group through the darkness.

The figure then put another hand up, reaching straight through the fragile beam of light. With a blood filled roar of desperate, hungry pain, the figure’s arms twitched erratically as if being shaken by a seizure. It took two large steps forward, revealing its face clearly in the trembling light. For the briefest of moments, Dodger felt his blood run ice cold as he stared into the empty, gaping eye sockets of the creature which had just jumped from out of the darkness. Its red skinless flesh glistened like raw meat in the dull light. Dodger’s reflexes failed him as he was gripped tightly by one hand, then another, then another, and then another. There

were too many arms, too many hands, too many skinless, quivering fingers, digging like little teeth into Dodger's body.

"Fuck! What the fuck is that!?" Fort shouted as his legs gave way beneath him. He fell down in the darkness, scrambling to escape the writhing mass of fleshy arms that lashed out from the shadows.

"Shit! Dodger!" Iron screamed with panic, unable to control his voice. Tira's light whipped upward and flickered out of existence, leaving them lost and blind, with only the pitiful squealing of the creature offering any sense of space. Iron reached out desperately, wrapping his big hands around the creature's trembling arms. Iron struggled to get a grip on the wriggling mass of arms as puss and blood coated Iron's hands. He squeezed as hard as he could, feeling mangled, crooked bones beneath the thin flesh of the creature. He roared as he gripped as hard as he could, pulling the monster away from Dodger.

A miserable, guttural screech filled the room as Iron slammed the creature to the ground. Tira's flashlight hit the ground, landing with the beam focused right at the creature. Dodger fell back, struggling to catch his breath as he watched the creature swing its slender, twisted limbs out like whips. It slammed Iron in the side of his head, knocking him down somewhere in the darkness.

"Iron!" Tira bellowed out as she swung an axe over her head, making direct contact with the monster's back. It unleashed a pitiful screech that threatened to shatter Tira's ears as it recoiled. Before Dodger could even see what happened, the monster threw its head upward, slamming Tira directly in the face. It lashed out with its hellish arms, knocking Tira back. She screamed with pain as she fell down the flight of stairs. Dodger's head swirled with a mixture of all the drinks he had enjoyed through the night. He could not bring himself to find his legs, much less even think about what

to do in the situation. With a blood filled gurgle, the arms reached for Dodger again, wrapping its fourth, fifth, and sixth arms around his throat. He could no longer breathe. His vision blurred as he stared directly into the empty, black caverns that were supposed to be the creature's eye sockets. From those caverns leaked puss and cold liquid. Dodger's his throat collapsed in on itself as a toothless, wide grin taunted him. There was nothing he could do.

"Shit! Dodger!" Fort shouted as he reached for the knife on his belt. With trembling hands, he brought his knife back behind his head, thinking back to his teenage years spent throwing knives in his backyard, trying to look cool, trying to get his knives to stick, trying to throw knives the way he had seen Dodger throw knives when Dodger came around Fort's parents' house years ago to do electrical work. Fort never forgot the excitement and admiration he felt when Dodger did one knife throw after another, and one trick shot after another. Dodger smiled to himself with pride as he brought a smile and sense of wonder a random kid. For years, Fort had chased after that memory of Dodger, trying to be just as strong and as admirable as the electrician he had only ever met just once for such a short time. The emotion of the situation got the better of him. Fort was no idiot. He knew he would never be anything like Dodger.

Fort's arm twitched as he sent his knife sailing through the air. He was nothing like Dodger. His knife slammed to a clattering halt against the back wall, falling to the ground next to Dodger. He had missed his target by at least two feet.

Dodger's vision grew dark as the creature lowered its toothless gums ever closer to Dodger's face. It's dozens of baby sized wriggling fingers dug into Dodger's throat like jaws clamping down. The creature had set its entire body weight down onto Dodger's chest. Its body trembled as it let out a sickening wheezing sound. Was it laughing? Dodger's arms fell limp at his sides. He had stopped breathing. A cold black haze spread from his peripheral vision, filling his eyes with darkness. Then.

A blinding flash of light.

No, it wasn't just a flash.

The entire world had become white.

Blank white as far as the eye can see.

No floor. No walls. No detail of any kind.

Nothing.

There stood Dodger, as still and calm as the full moon in a cloudless sky. He looked down below him to see he had no shadow.

The creature was gone. It no longer had its hands wrapped around Dodger's throat. But Fort wasn't there either. Neither was Tira. Iron wasn't there either. Dodger was alone.

"Dodger. Rodgers."

No. He wasn't alone. Someone was there with him. He cautiously, carefully turned around, looking behind him. He didn't see anyone there, but clear as the light of day, he heard someone say his name. No, wait, that wasn't true. He could see something. He could see a pair of eyes. He wasn't sure who they belonged to. He simply felt an overwhelming sense of comfort. Ever so slowly, the eyes came into focus until he could see the face of a stranger.

"Howdy, partner," Dodger whispered. His hands tingled with numbness as he felt his throat to check for any kind of injury. The pain he expected to feel was gone.

"You are about to die," the stranger said, its voice cold and distance, seeming to come from all directions at the same time.

"Yeah, I reckon you're right about that," Dodger sighed, squinting his eyes to understand exactly what it was he was looking at. He understood at that moment he was not alone in that empty

white abyss. The stranger there standing just a few feet in front of him stood taller than him by many heads. It was unnaturally tall and slender, standing with a posture and form that made it clear it was no human being. Yet, entirely contrary to the creature in the steel mill, this stranger brought a sense of peace and reassurance to Dodger. "That's... my fault. I guess I deserve it for acting the way I did. I just wish I didn't let the others get dragged into all this trouble with me," Dodger hung his head in shame, unable to look the stranger in the eyes.

"Why do you not fight back? You have acted in the defense of other beings before." The stranger spoke, with no sign of interrogation or ridicule in its voice.

"Huh? Why? I'm drunk off my ass. I... been drinkin' alcohol all night. I didn't think things would end up like this," Dodger sighed, keeping his head hung low.

"Your... ass? Your rear end appears to still be attached to your body. Please explain," the stranger replied dryly.

"Hahaha, what? It's just a saying. It means I'm extremely drunk," Dodger could not help but laugh. He looked up to get a clear look at the stranger. In clear detail, Dodger saw an oddly familiar slender figure, with no apparent defined muscle mass on its branch-like arms and legs. Its thin torso showed no signs of emaciation, yet only barely resembled the form of a human. Its skin was a dull, grey color which accentuated its brilliant, large, deep black eyes; eyes which seemed to reflect the entirety of the world in all its flaws and beauties with an utter lack of judgment.

"You are drunk so you are unable to act. Why do your people drink alcohol if that results in the inability to act?" the stranger asked, its voice ever so slightly peaking with curiosity.

"It's complicated. It's like... It becomes much easier to do things we wouldn't normally do, and we can think things we

normally tell ourselves we aren't allowed to think," Dodger scratched his moustache as he tried to scrape together whatever wisdom he could manage.

"It grants an individual the ability to break the rules, but at a cost that must be paid. Understood. This arrangement sounds... convenient," the stranger said, tilting its head downward with thought.

"That's an awfully strange way to put it, but yeah, I reckon that's about right," Dodger chuckled.

"The physical condition of being drunk. How much time must pass before you return to your normal state of existence?" the stranger asked, this time slightly raising its right hand.

"Huh. Odd way to say that, but for me, I been this drunk before and slept it off in time for work. But to be safe, I'd say twelve hours should get me all cleaned up," Dodger said, squinting hard as he tried to figure out with the stranger was asking.

"Understood. I will assist you and your companions," the stranger spoke plainly, its tone clashing with the context of its words.

"That's awfully kind of you. I won't say no to that, but I gotta ask. Why are you helping me?" Dodger asked, stepping in closer to the stranger.

"When you and I first met, I asked you a similar question. The answer you gave me was this. When someone is in need, you help them. There's nothing else to it," the stranger spoke, this time, its voice losing its cold and distant tone, perfectly mimicking the inflection and tone of Dodger's speaking patterns. It looked down at Dodger and barely managed to bend the corners of its thin mouth into a subtle

smirk. “The being you called Samba. I asked it the same question but it did have an answer for me.”

“Hey, wait, we’ve met before? And how do you know Samba?” Dodger thought he shouted with confusion, but a heavily pressure pushing down on him from somewhere high above somehow kept him calm and level headed.

“I was in the place you call the ‘Brandish Property’. A violent creature attacked me. I was not able to defend myself as I became entrapped by a restraining device. The being called Samba came to my aid and protected me from the violent creature. Samba sustained bodily injury in exchange for defending me from the creature. That is when you and I first met. You brought me to the space beneath your dwelling for protection,” the stranger spoke. As it recounted its stories, its cold voice grew increasingly warm, wavering with what could have been mistaken for emotion.

Dodger thought hard, recalling everything that had taken place over the past few days. Yet the more sense things made, the more questions presented themselves. Why couldn’t Dodger remember any of this? The stranger reached forward, gently setting its hand on Dodger’s shoulder. Like a light switching on, Dodger recalled the memory of finding Samba’s body the night he found the stranger injured by a bear trap. Samba struggled to breath, trying his hardest to give Dodger a look of comfort with the last bit of life in his eyes.

Samba’s body had been torn open, his intestines spread across the ground in a way that could never be fixed. Dodger’s eyes filled with tears as he tried to reassure his

golden retriever that everything was going to be alright. Dodger held Samba in his lap as he reassured him that Samba was a very good dog, in fact, the very best dog in the world. He gently ran his hand across Samba's head, trying to not look at the organs and blood that had been ripped from Samba's wounds. Dodger had got there just in time to hold Samba one last time.

Samba took his last breath, licking Dodger's hand to comfort him the only way he knew how. Dodger lost track of time as he held Samba in his arms, waiting for the tears to stop streaming from his eyes, all the while, the stranger stood at his side and watched. Dodger had to give Samba a proper burial. He couldn't just leave his best friend there. With his bare hands, he carefully placed Samba's organs back into Samba's body as best he could. He carried Samba back to his truck while helping the stranger at the same time.

"Oh, God. Samba... He... went all the way out there. To save you," Dodger whimpered as his eyes burned. He fought hard to keep the tears back.

"I could not protect him in return," the stranger said, hanging his head the same Dodger had done just moments ago. "I learned from one of your people the concepts of gratitude and debt, though I am uncertain I fully understand. It would seem I must, as your kind would say, return the favor."

"So it's like that, huh? I can settle with that. I never met a fella like you, but you must be alright if Samba gave his life to help you," Dodger tried his hardest to smile.

"It is time for you to return," the stranger said, looking down as it held its wrist up to its face.

“Huh? Why are you looking at your wrist?” Dodger asked.

“Is it not customary for your people to perform this action when determining the passage of time?” the stranger asked, seemingly a bit concerned.

“Oh, hahaha! Yeah, sure. You can do that. That’s pretty good,” Dodger chuckled, feeling some strange sense of camaraderie with the stranger. “So, uh, you’re gonna help us fight that weird mutant thing in the steel mill, huh? I’m not sure how the others will react when they meet you.”

“I am unable to do that this time. That would result in an unacceptable violation of the rules. I have already, as your people would say, bent the rules by speaking with you here,” the stranger explained, its voice becoming somewhat lower.

“Well, that makes sense I think. Maybe. How are you getting by with bending the rules then?” Dodger asked, his curiosity peaked as he wondered what could possibly be within the capability of such a mysterious being.

“As your people would say, I am exploiting a loophole. When you leave here, you will have no memory of me, nor the dealings we have shared together. It is my understanding that your people may break the rules to an extent should the emotions of an individual dictate it appropriate. I am yet unable to comprehend this illogical behavior,” the stranger stated coldly, returning to its default matter-of-fact tone.

“I guess it doesn’t what we say then, if I’m not going to remember any of it,” Dodger sighed, realizing he would not be able to take with him the memory of what happened on the

night Samba died. “If I won’t remember anything, what’s the point of you sharing all this information with me, then?”

“Your people possess something that transcends memory, which, as I have said before, I am unable to fully comprehend. This thing you call emotion appears to reach beyond what you consider to be time. Tell me, Dodger. How do you feel now?” the stranger spoke, its voice becoming ever more distant.

“I feel at peace. Like I finally let go of something heavy I’ve been carrying for a long time,” Dodger sighed, giving the stranger a vulnerable look. It was then he understood in the eyes of this being, Dodger was smaller than even a mere child. He could not comprehend what he could possibly mean to such a being.

“Then I will see ya later, baby,” the stranger spoke plainly, unblinking at it stared at Dodger.

“Hahahaha, what!?! Now why do you say that?” Dodger could not stop himself from laughing aloud.

“Is that not a customary farewell of your people?” the stranger asked, slightly tilting its head to one side. Dodger could swear he could see the stranger squinting at him.

“I don’t know who you learned that from, but sure. You can say that if you want. Anyway, thank you for your help. It’s been a pleasure. You take care of yourself, partner,” Dodger nodded, feeling his senses suddenly sharpen.

The stranger stared deep into Dodger’s eyes as the world suddenly became blank white again. No, the world hadn’t become white, the stranger had disappeared. Or... was

there a difference? Dodger shut his eyes hard to be certain of what had just happened.

He opened his eyes to see the blood red creature glaring down at him through two bottomless wells. The dank, moldy air of the steel mill filled Dodger's lungs as he calculated his situation.

With a smooth, fluid motion, Dodger reached out and grabbed the knife that Fort had thrown against the wall. With the blade firmly in hand, Dodger jabbed forward with all the strength in his body, forcing the knife through one of the creature's vacant eye sockets.

"Iron!" Dodger shouted as he pushed up against the creature, fighting back the countless baby sized arms that clawed at him. He gripped the knife handle and forced the creature's head back. An ear shattering squeal of pain caused the building walls to rattle like broken bones.

Iron scrambled to regain his footing upon hearing Dodger's voice. He struggled to grab hold of the creature but the liquid seeping from the creature's body made it impossible to get a grip.

"Shit! It's too slippery!" Iron yelled.

"Try this! Second knife!" Fort shouted as he plunged a hunting knife deep into the back of the creature. "Use that knife as a grip!"

"You bet!" Iron bellowed as he gripped the knife and twisted the creature away from Dodger, throwing the mass of writhing arms away into the darkness, out of the beam of light. With that, Dodger jumped up onto his feet, reaching

down to his belt to grab one of his throwing knives. Fort turned to Dodger, relieved to see that Dodger was still in one piece. Faster than the blink of an eye, a mass of twitching flesh flickered through the beam of light on the ground, headed right toward Fort.

Before the creature could grab Fort, Dodger slammed his fist forward with a throwing knife in hand, stabbing the creature deep in its other eye socket. The creature screeched and kicked out in agony. Its legs whipped out toward Iron, but before its attack could connect, Dodger grabbed the creature's legs with a fierce, furious grip. For a split second, Iron caught the glimpse of some fire burning bright behind Dodger's eyes.

"Dodger!" Tira shouted through the darkness as she clambered back up the stairs and through the doorway. Dodger, Iron, and Fort each held one knife gripped tightly in hand, holding the thrashing creature down on the ground. Following the sound of her voice, Dodger kicked the axe on the ground toward Tira.

"Tira! Here's the axe!" Dodge stated, calmly keeping a tight grip on the creature's eye socket. With a sickening crunch of metal against bone, Tira brought the axe down on the creature's neck, nearly severing its head almost entirely. Dodger and Fort released their grip just in time to avoid Tira's attack. Yet just as they thought it was over, the creature's head rolled back, hanging on by just a strand of flesh. It stared Tira right through her soul as a sickening death rattle sprayed from its throat. It extended its undulating arms toward Tira as she stumble back in utter shock. A split second before it could reach her, Dodger slid forward and whipped his arm out with

another throwing knife in hand, severing the monster's twisted head from its gnarled body. The monster fell to the ground, motionless and silent.

The four exhausted figures each held their breath as they listened intently for any other signs of movement from farther in the building. After Tira recovered the flashlight from the ground, they all breathed a sigh of a relief, able to finally look each other in the eye. Tira pointed the flashlight down to the creature that had nearly killed them, giving it a distant, disgusted looking.

"Godamnit," Dodger sighed as he fell back onto a metal bench, "I said we only wanted to talk."