

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

Jerrel Dulay

Chapter XVI

Rauno awoke to the sound of eggs gently frying in a pan. The scent of freshly cooked hash browns and moose sausages eased him out of an uneasy sleep. He struggled to pry his sore eyes open to see a familiar timber ceiling above a well used fireplace. After managing to turn himself over to his side, he noticed a large bodied man he didn't recognize, with leather overalls half undone and faded pink plaid shirt unbuttoned, asleep on the couch. Who was this stranger and how did he get there? No... Rauno recognized him, behind some hazy, unsteady memory.

"You want your coffee now?" Dodger asked as he flicked a pan with an effortless twist of his wrist, flipping an omelette over.

"Yep," Rauno groaned as he struggled to drag himself up onto his feet. He looked around and noticed Fort asleep in a sleeping bag on the floor of Dodger's living room. A delicate thread of sunlight weaved in through window blinds on the far side of the room. Rauno stumbled his way through the house, his head spinning and throbbing as he set his hand on a mug filled with steaming hot coffee. With eyes barely open, he turned around and dropped himself down into a chair at the kitchen table as if operating on auto-pilot.

Dodger's ears perked up at the sound of Rauno sliding a kitchen chair into position. Rauno took a cautious sip of his coffee, deeply inhaling the steam from the mug. With one

hand still steering the pan on the stove, Dodger opened a drawer and pulled out a vintage, round, cup coaster decorated with hand drawn horses. Rauno began to lower the mug from his face, with eyes closed, enjoying the smell of his favorite coffee. With an effortless twist of his wrist, Dodger sent the cup coaster spinning through the air, barely looking out through the corner of his eye. Like a heat seeking missile, the coaster came to a sliding stop, landing just below Rauno's mug, catching it just before it could make contact with the kitchen table. After taking a deep breath, Rauno lifted up his mug and rotated the coaster so that the graphic was perfectly aligned to face him. He then set the mug back down.

"How are ya feeling?" Dodger asked, his voice ringing out clearly through the morning haze.

"Yep. Just great. Perfectly fine," Rauno croaked, rubbing some dull pain from the side of his head. His eyes widened for a moment as he reached down and patted his pocket to check for something. He breathed a sigh of relief as he glanced over to see Dodger still cooking. With the sudden crackling of oil, the fragrance of some sweet sizzling meat filled the house.

"Whoa, is that bacon?" Fort jump up out of his sleeping bag like a mouse trap snapping shut to catch its prey. He whipped his head left then right, unable to get a bearing on his surroundings. He lost track of his words as he stared at Iron sleeping deeply on the couch, his hairy chest bulging through his unbuttoned shirt like an impossibly muscular man. Fort felt himself shrink smaller and smaller as he walked to the kitchen table, remembering where he was and how he got there.

“How about a real omelette for breakfast? Or do you want me to call Nickelas from the diner to come make one for you?” Dodger said, hiding a subtle smirk on his face.

“No! I’m happy with what whatever you’re cooking!” Fort answered immediately, smiling as he sat down onto a chair next to Rauno. “Mornin’, Rauno. That coffee sure smells good.”

“Morning. It’s Frontier Coffee. Go pour yourself a mug,” Rauno said, managing to pry his eyes open.

“Cool. Cool. So uh, where are the mugs?” Fort asked as he approached the kitchen cabinets.

“Just look around until you find ‘em,” Dodger said with a cool tone of voice as he walked away from the kitchen and toward the couch in the living room. With a spatula in one hand, Dodger tapped Iron on the shoulder. A moment passed, and after receiving no response, Dodger grabbed Iron’s arm and shook him with some force. Like the snapping of a bear trap, Iron sat up, throwing his arms in front of his face as if to protect himself from an attack. For a brief moment, a look of utter, helpless fear contorted Iron’s face into a pitiful expression as he looked up at Dodger. Iron yelped as he recoiled. “Hey, whoa, it’s me. It’s Dodger. Everything is alright.”

“Where am I? Where’s Shannon? Is she here!?” Iron groaned as his bloodshot eyes wearily searched the corners of the room in panic.

“We had a couple drinks last night. We’re at my house. Come on and get up. I’ve got breakfast just about ready to

serve,” Dodger said with a nonchalant shrug as he walked back to the stove with his spatula in hand.

“I... uh... fu... I don’t think I can handle breakfast,” Iron’s words slowly grinded through his dry throat as he stumbled toward the kitchen in a blurry daze. He barely managed to reach the far end of the table before he collapsed down into a chair.

“Are you alright? You look rough, man,” Fort said, his voice seemingly coming from miles away. Iron mumbled something unintelligible as he buried his face in his open palms.

Dodger turned off the stove and opened the oven, pulling out a tray of something that was too far for Iron to see. As if drawing on years of practice, Dodger quickly served up multiple dishes and set them down at the table. Iron was just about to decline the offer for breakfast until he realized what he was being served.

“Country biscuits with sausage gravy, right?” Dodger asked, his voice firm yet gentle.

“Uh, yeah. How did you know?” Iron asked in disbelief, unable to hide the smile on his face, overwhelmed that someone had gone out of their way to do something kind for him.

Dodger shrugged with a cool attitude as he sat down to his own plate, hesitating for a moment as he looked left, then right around his plate. Without any exchange of words, Rauno slid a knife and fork over to Dodger, who picked up the silverware as if expecting them to have been there the whole

time. Dodger and Rauno held up their coffee mugs, clinking them together without even so much as making eye contact. Iron watched on from the farthest end of the table, miles away, trying his hardest to repress a sense of jealousy that was welling up inside his chest. He breathed deeply before taking a small, careful bite of the biscuits and gravy. He couldn't fight back a smile from forming on his face as he tasted the best breakfast he had ever had in his life.

"Well? How are they? The biscuits and gravy alright?" Dodger asked, his mouth half full of sausage and bacon.

"Yeah. It's perfect," Iron's chest tightened up with some sense of admiration. In that moment in time, he wished he could have been Rauno; he wished he could have been Dodger's friends for years and years and known what it felt like to be understood. He turned and looked away from the others, wrestling with a feeling he couldn't fully wrap his head around.

"Can I get you a coffee, babe?" Fort croaked with the voice of an old waitress who had been smoking for 45 years. Iron couldn't help but laugh as Fort set down a mug down onto the table for him. The men enjoyed their breakfast without saying much for a while until Fort cheerily said, "Hey, wow. This is really good. Way better than the omelette from the diner!"

"Isn't this Karol's favorite? Where is she?" Rauno asked, his voice brightening up as he inhaled a swig of coffee.

"She's not here," Dodger answered plainly while shoveling his breakfast into his mouth.

“Your wife? Oh, are you guys fighting too?” Iron asked, looking over to Dodger from across the length of the table.

“Nah, nothing like that. She’s got a new job at the Burden Lake Campground. Some of her coworkers haven’t shown up to work so she’s had to take on extra shifts,” Dodger explained, clearing his throat. He barely batted an eye.

“Oh,” Iron said, burying his expression behind his coffee mug, embarrassed.

Dodger got up to refill his coffee mug. Without even asking or even visually checking first, he leaned over and refilled Rauno’s coffee mug as well.

“Man, you guys really had a lot to drink last night. But Dodger looks as fresh as a dew drop on autumn grass. You can really hold your liquor,” Fort exclaimed, glancing back and forth between Dodger and Iron.

“I guess,” Dodger shrugged, looking away to avoid making eye contact. Iron nodded with an impressed look toward Dodger.

“Too bad Karol missed out on a good breakfast,” Rauno said, clearly enjoying his meal. Dodger reached over and dropped an extra sausage and strip of bacon onto Rauno’s plate.

“Huh... My wife and I never cook for each other,” Iron blurted out, wishing only a few seconds later he had kept his mouth shut. Dodger looked over to him, trying to not feel sorry for him, but feeling the pain that came with Iron’s words. Rauno continued to eat, acting as if Iron hadn’t even spoken at all.

“Well, I haven’t had bacon in years. It’s just one of those things I forgot and never think about, you know? I wouldn’t mind it for breakfast from time to time,” Fort tried to laugh away some uncomfortable tension he could just about visibly see hanging in the air between Rauno and Iron. He watched the men at the table before saying, “Man, why’s everybody gotta look so serious with their big lumberjack beards? I’d grow one too if I could,” just to fill in the awkward silence.

A quiet moment passed as the men finished their meals. Fort stepped outside to look for something in his car and Iron left the kitchen to look for a bathroom, leaving Rauno and Dodger sitting with empty plates at the table.

“Hey, Dodger. I’m sorry I didn’t go with you last night,” Rauno sighed, his words bursting out of him as if having been held back for hours.

“What? Hey, don’t worry about that. It was nothing,” Dodger tried to reassure his friend.

“No, it wasn’t nothing. You went in that building because of me. I was too scared to go with you,” Rauno cut Dodger off from speaking further, his words trembling with seething anger. “I should have gone with you.”

“You fell and hit your head. You could have been hurt in there. Don’t worry about it. Seriously.” Dodger said in his most reassuring voice.

“But I do worry about it. Even your new friend, Iron, said it. He... called me a coward,” Rauno set his coffee cup

down, missing the cup coaster and hitting the table with a thud that resounded throughout the house, rattling Dodger.

“Well, we had a few drinks last night. He didn’t mean it,” Dodger tried to reason.

“Dodger... Am I a coward?” Rauno asked, his eyes peering deep into his coffee, searching for an answer in his nearly empty mug. He somehow knew there was no place in the world he could hide from his shame.

Dodger stuttered, unsure of how to answer. He looked away, his eyes searching around the room for any kind of answer, knowing Rauno wouldn’t accept any kind of head-patting or coddling. Dodger’s eyes landed on something glistening by the front door; an amber beam of morning light landing on some tarnished metal object. It was the wood cutting axe that Tira picked up from the steel mill the night before. Behind splotches of dried, mysterious black liquid, the words, “B. Brandish” could be read written on the handle in permanent marker.

“Do you gotta go back to work this weekend?” Dodger asked. His eyes remaining locked on the axe. Rauno turned around to see what Dodger was staring at with such intent.

“No. I took the whole week off,” Rauno answered as he got up and walked over to the axe. “So this is the thing you found in the building?”

“Yep,” Dodger said, finishing off his coffee.

“And the weird animal that was in there?” Rauno asked, picking up the axe cautiously, carefully to not grab it where the sick looking liquid had dried.

“It was just like that journal page you found described. Some kind of mutant animal,” Dodger said, peering up over the tops of his glasses, locking eyes with Rauno.

“Now I wonder what Bull Brandish was doing leaving his axe in the steel mill,” Rauno said, scratching his beard as he examined the name on the axe.

“If you want to help me track him down, I’ll ask him myself,” Dodger said, knowing he would be able to snag his friend’s attention.

“Doesn’t this seem familiar to you?” Rauno asked, setting the axe down.

“What do you mean?” Dodger placed the plates into the kitchen sink.

“You know when I first started working with Flatwoods Electrical? We had that party for Stormy and his son. I didn’t really know anyone in town back then. Things were different. I had too much to drink. Sheriff Fred kept buying me more and more drinks, and then we went running around on some... how do you say it? Wild goose hunt?” Rauno spoke carefully, looking over to the framed photo of Dodger and Samba sitting on the fireplace mantle.

“Yeah. That was a long time ago. I don’t remember much about it,” Dodger reached over and grabbed his left hand as a phantom pain shot through his fingers.

“We ran around all over town. Went to the desert. Out onto the mountain. To Pascagoula Meadow. Don’t you remember seeing any... weird animals?” Rauno asked, hoping that Dodger would indeed have an answer for him.

“No. We were celebrating, you know? So we had a lot to drink. I can barely remember anyone who was there. All I know is... I got... hurt,” Dodger recounted unsteadily. “To be honest, I didn’t even remember you were running around out there with us.”

“I remember Rauno being there,” Iron said as he stumbled back into the room. “We all had too much to drink that night. Well, pretty much everyone except Bull. He was probably the only sober one.”

“So he would remember any... weird animals we saw that night?” Rauno said, for the first time, looking Iron straight in the eyes. His voice was rigid with resolve.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Iron replied, reaching for his coffee and falling back into his seat.

“That weird thing we saw last night, I never seen anything like it. Bull seems to be connected to it somehow. If he knows anything about the night of Stormy’s party, then I want to know too,” Dodger picked up Bull’s axe as he looked back at a family photo of himself, Karol, and Dahlia hanging on the kitchen wall, protected in a frame he had built by hand himself.

“Well, there’s plenty of animals out there. Bears and wolves and cougars. Everyone knows how dangerous the mountain can be,” Iron said sluggishly.

“Fine. You don’t have to help us. Stay home if you’re scared,” Rauno snapped. Dodger flinched, shocked by Rauno’s sudden fiery tone. Iron looked back with a look of confusion, unsure of where Rauno’s hostility was coming from.

“No, I’m definitely in the game. You want help finding Bull, I’m there. I’m just not sure what you expect to hear from him,” Iron said softly, clearly unaware of the details of the night before.

“I want to stretch. Dodger, are your weights still set up behind the garage?” Rauno asked, making no effort to hide the irritation in his voice.

“Yeah, still there,” Dodger answered. Rauno stormed out the front door and into the crisp morning air.

“Hey, uh, would you mind dropping me home? I need a shower and fresh clothes. And my wife... she’ll be pissed off at me for not coming home last night. I gotta go find out how much of my stuff she’s destroyed,” Iron muttered, looking up at Dodger’s family photos on the wall with some painful sense of envy.

“Yeah, no problem, partner,” Dodger’s voice wavered with pity when he noticing what was Iron looking at. His mouth hung open as he found himself unsure of what to say to comfort his friend.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” Iron shrugged with a distant look in his eye. “Life is just like that. It sucks, but you only got one life so you just hang on and live it for as long as you can.”

“Well that sounds like bullshit to me,” Dodger stated harshly with a cold, sharp look in his eye. “If you don’t want to keep stepping in bullshit, change where you’re walking and go around it.”

A quiet, cold moment passed between the two men. Iron set his mug down, staring at a mere puddle of coffee left, almost as if to delay for as long as possible having to leave.

“You go on home and do what you need to do. Then you come back here and check out my workshop in the basement. See what tools you need to fix up that frame you and your uncle filled with bugs,” Dodger patted Iron on the back. Iron looked back at him, feeling some strange sense of reassurance, understanding that he indeed had a safe place to come.

Dodger stepped outside into the brisk air to see Fort rifling around the back of his car. The pink sky and amber clouds brought a sense of tranquility to Dodger’s mind, soothing the tension left over from the night before. The gravel of the driveway crunched beneath Dodger’s boots as he walked over to the tree with a target hanging on it.

“Hey, Fort, come over here,” Dodger waved. Fort closed his car door and walked over to join Dodger. Dodger reached for his belt and brought out a throwing knife. “See that target on the tree? Let me see you throw that.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Fort said confidently. He took Dodger’s knife, found his footing, and whipped his arm forward. With a harsh whistling, the knife tumbled through the air before clashing hard with the target. The handle of the knife slammed into the target before sending the knife bouncing back off to the side of the tree. Fort winced in embarrassment as he turned and looked for Dodger’s reaction.

“Hmm. That’s not bad, but not great. What are you doing to control the rotations of the knife?” Dodger said with a fatherly tone. He scratched his cheek, preoccupied and unable to process exactly what it was that seemed odd to him.

“Rotations? Well, I sort of, kinda memorize the distance I am from the target, and I just try to rely on muscle memory. Most of the time I can stick the knife in the target,” Fort said, unsure.

“Right. It looks like you’re throwing it like a baseball. A knife is different from that, though. Here, try this. Hold the knife like this with your pointer finger on the back edge of the knife. You want a clean, linear, vertical arm movement. Push down on the back edge as you swing your arm forward to slow down the rotation. You want the point of the knife to reach its forward most point right when it reaches the target. Like this. Watch me,” Dodger spoke as if talking to his daughter, Dahlia. But things were different somehow. Fort nodded along excitedly, his face glowing with admiration. With slow, deliberate movement, Dodger effortlessly planted a knife into the dead center of the target.

“Man. That’s so cool,” Fort said, struck with awe.

“Practice it like I showed you. If you get this technique right, you can throw pretty much anything,” Dodger said firmly, handing one more knife to Fort. Without looking back, he walked around the house to the back of the garage, hearing Fort repeatedly fail to stick the knives into the target. Behind the garage, Dodger found Rauno staring down at the weight lifting bench, just standing.

“Everything alright?” Dodger saw that none of the weights had even been moved. He noticed Rauno’s clenched fists which eased up when Rauno heard Dodger’s voice.

“We’re gonna find Bull and figure out what happened back then, right?” Rauno asked.

“Yeah, we’ll make it happen,” Dodger said. He sat down on the bench and pretended to reach for some weights. “Why does it matter so much to you, anyway?” The early morning light cast a delicate golden halo on the two friends who had spent years pushing each other to get stronger on that weight lifting bench.

“I shouldn’t have had that much to drink the night of Stormy’s party. I shouldn’t have gone running around with you guys,” Rauno said as he sat down on the bench next to Dodger. “I was supposed to catch a flight to Finland the next morning. My old man was sick. I was supposed to go see him. We ran around chasing weird animals and I missed my flight.”

“Well? It was just a flight. I thought you were able to get a flight the following day?” Dodger tried to make eye contact with Rauno who looked away.

“I did. I got the flight the next day, 24 hours later. By the time I got there, my old man was already dead for about 12 hours. I could have got there in time to see him, but I didn’t. It’s nobody’s fault but my own. There was a lot of things I wanted to say to him. Maybe there were things he wanted to say to me too. I’ll never know. And I’ll never get to say those things. Even if I only had a couple of minutes with him, it would have been enough,” Rauno exhaled a breath he had been holding in for more than fifteen years. Each of his

sentences seemed to have been punctuated by the stark slamming of metal against wood; a desperate throwing of a knife unable to hit its target. Dodger sat in silence, staring at the ground. "It was my decision to go hunting those animals with you guys. I just... want to know if it was for a good reason. I want to know if it was worth it. Was there any meaning to it at all, or did I throw away my last chance to see my old man for nothing?"

"Our lives and our actions only have meaning because we decide they have meaning. Whether or not those things actually do have meaning doesn't really matter. We gotta decide all that stuff for ourselves. And for the stuff we don't know, we need to have faith and stand by what we believe," Dodger said softly, as if repeating words that had been handed down to him from generations passed.

"I'm not like you, Dodger. I don't have imagination. I can't just decide on what I am supposed to believe. I need to see it and hear it. And if I can't see and hear it, I can't stop thinking about it. I need to know. My old man always said there were no such things as monsters. If he's wrong, I need to know exactly why and how," Rauno said, his tough, distant tone softened to a vulnerable plea for help. Dodger could tell he was afraid. It was a tone of voice Dodger never heard Rauno use around other people. Dodger looked away and nudged Rauno with his shoulder.

"Don't worry about anything. We'll get to the bottom of it. Two weeks ago when Samba died... I don't know why I can't remember exactly what happened, but I have a feeling it has something to do with those... weird animals," Dodger said, his voice rang out confidently in the cool morning air.

“You can’t remember? You mean like how I can’t remember what happened to me last night?” Rauno said, sounding increasingly alert.

“Don’t make it sound like that. If Slim were here, you know he’d say something like aliens beamed us up, stuck a probe up our assholes, and erased our memories,” Dodger stated plainly with a straight face. Rauno couldn’t help but openly laugh. Dodger smirked in return. From the corner of his eye, Dodger could see Iron standing just beyond the corner of the house, listening in from a distance.

“Hey! I got one! Dodger! I did it!” Fort shouted, his voice waving in the air like a victory flag.

“Alright, I better go check on the kid,” Dodger chuckled. He walked past Iron leaning against the corner of the house, pretending to not notice him.

“Sweet Kansas! I got a second one!” Fort cheered, turning around to look for Dodger.

“Hey, not bad. You missed the target but at least you stuck the knives into the tree,” Dodger said, trying to sound supportive.

“I’m improving. Don’t worry, I won’t miss the next time. When we go search for Bull, I’ll definitely do better,” Fort said, trying to sound distant and cool.

“Whoa, what do you mean when we go search for Bull? Did you already forget what happened last night? It’s too dangerous out there. Sorry, but I can’t let you go with me next time,” Dodger said firmly, stepping in too close to Fort, as if it

intimidate him. Instead of backing down or flinching, Fort stood his ground, expressionless and still.

“You don’t need some dumb kid to tell you that you’ve been making some reckless decisions. If I just sat at home and let you keep putting yourself in danger, that would make me a coward. Real men aren’t cowards,” Fort said, his voice deepening as he stared Dodger in the eyes. Something about Fort’s words echoed through Dodger’s mind. Maybe it was the wording that reminded him of the conversation he just had with Rauno. Maybe it was the fact that Fort had just stood his ground.

“Fine,” Dodger shrugged. Fort was caught off guard.

“Oh, what? Seriously?” Fort grinned.

“Yeah. I could use a hand. I want to head out to look for Bull’s campsite this afternoon. You can help me prepare the gear we need,” Dodger said as he took his knives back from Fort.

“Alright. What’s the game plan?” Fort dusted his hands off before crossing his arms, striking a tough guy pose.

“I’ve got things to take care of. It’d be a big help if you could drive Iron home, then pick up some ammo from the gun shop, then grab some things from the hardware store,” Dodger instructed.

“Piece of cake. Oh, I had something in my car I wanted to show you, but I guess I’ll show you later when we’ve got everything sorted out. I’ll meet you back here when I’ve got it all done then,” Fort took a folded paper from Dodger then

jogged toward his car, waving to Iron who was watching them from a distance.

“Right. See you back here when you’re done,” Dodger said. He made his way back toward Rauno, catching Iron along the way. “Fort will give you a ride home while Rauno and I go and sort out some things. We’re going to look for Bull’s camp later this afternoon.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll grab some equipment from my house and meet you back here as soon as I can,” Iron shook Dodger’s hand firmly, for a brief second, seeming unwilling to let go.

After cleaning up the kitchen, Rauno and Dodger set out in Dodger’s truck, following familiar old roads, past the closed sheriff’s office, past a suspiciously closed Chunky Chicken, and past an equally alarmingly closed antique shop. After a quiet drive, as both men enjoyed the sound of the open air passing them by through open windows, Dodger’s truck pulled into a familiar driveway, stopping beneath sleepy trees leaning in close over a lonely home.

Dodger stepped out of the truck, with Rauno following behind, not even asking where they were. Dodger stepped up creaking stairs up an old front deck, ducked to avoid a wind chime, and knocked on a mahogany door polished to a pristine shine.

“Hey, it’s Dodger. You here?” Dodger called out, but all he heard were the sounds of birds chirping high above in the treetops. He knocked again. “Karn. It’s Dodger. Are you home?” He waited a moment before trying the door knob.

Giving no resistance, the door silently slid open as if inviting Dodger to slip inside.

“You think something’s wrong?” Rauno muttered as he followed close behind.

“No idea,” Dodger squinted hard, looking around the home. The familiar scent of freshly cut wood and pine needles filled his senses, bringing him a sense of melancholic calm. He once again caught sight of framed photos seemingly from the 70s and 80s of four friends who seemed to have gone on all sorts of adventures together; fishing, hunting, rafting, barn building, and motorcycle riding. Dodger cautiously made his way down a hallway as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. At the end of the hallway, through an open door, he caught the glimpse of the foot of a bed with disturbed bed sheets.

“Karn? You there? It’s Dodger,” Dodger peered in through the doorway. There, sprawled all across the bed, still fully dressed in his clothes from the night before, was Karn, silent and unmoving. Dodger leaned in close and set his hand onto Karn’s wrist to check for a pulse. Dodger could barely detect any heartbeat. He set his open palm on Karn’s back, feeling only the most subtle and belabored of Karn’s breaths. “Shit.” Dodger muttered.

“What? What’s wrong with him?” Rauno asked apprehensively.

“Not sure,” Dodger barely managed to flip Karn over flat onto his back. “Karn, wake up!” Dodger said loudly. There was no response. Dodger flinched briefly as he thought he could hear the sound of voices humming from somewhere in the distance. Shaking that feeling away, he lifted up Karn’s

jacket sleeve to reveal a brilliantly shimmering bracelet with a small crystal sculpture in a shape Dodger couldn't fully recognize. Moving quickly, Dodger removed Karn's Starglass bracelet and set it down on the bed. He lifted Karn up off the bed, struggling to carry the little old man who was a lot heavier than he looked.

"I'm gonna put Karn in the truck. Can you look through his dresser and grab him a fresh pair of clothes? He'll probably want to change when he wakes up. Oh, and grab that bracelet too," Dodger said as he tried to hide the fact that he was barely able to lift and move such a little old man.

"Sure," Rauno replied, hesitating for a cold moment. His eyes flashed a twisted look of fear as he slowly reached for the Starglass on the bed.

Dodger carefully set Karn down into the back seat of the truck. As he buckled Karn in, Karn's hand lightly gripped Dodger's arm. The faintest flicker of light shone from behind Karn's barely open eyes. "Don't worry, partner. I got ya," Dodger reassured him. After he shut the door and turned around, he saw Rauno step out of the house and approach with a face as rigid and white as a picket fence. "What's wrong? Did you find a change of clothes for Karn?" Dodger asked.

"Well, yeah. I sure went through his dresser alright. I found a shirt and pants... but underneath... I saw some things," Rauno's mouth wretched in shock as his eyes widened. "I think I would like to wash my hands now."

They closed up Karn's house and headed back down the road toward town. At some point during the drive, Dodger

noticed Rauno had his legs crossed tightly with his arms folded heavily on his lap.

“Everything alright?” Dodger asked.

“Yeah. Everything okay. Nothing out of the ordinary,” Rauno stared intensely down at the floorboard, his face blushing a feverish red.

It didn’t take long for Dodger’s truck to reach a gathering of buildings huddled together in a small clearing surrounded by towering pine trees. A sign directly above the parked truck read, “Alpine Survivors Outdoor Equipment,” hung proudly on a log building with small glass windows. A small stack of firewood had been collected at the front of the building, next to a hand painted sign that read, “Get your Tire Chains NOW before we have to save your ass!”

Dodger turned off the truck engine and took a deep breath before saying, “You never talked much about your father before.

“It’s a waste of time to talk about things that make you angry,” Rauno answered, looking out his window.

“Sorry. You guys didn’t have a good relationship?” Dodger asked softly, aware too late that he may have been prying too much.

“It’s not him I’m angry at,” Rauno answered. He grinded his teeth for a moment before sighing. “We had a good relationship. He was the strongest man I ever knew. When I was young, I wanted to be strong just like him. But when he started getting sick, I couldn’t handle looking at him. I was too scared to look at him. I was a coward, so I left home. I

moved as far away as I could. I didn't care where I went as long as I didn't have to see him get more sick and weak." Rauno's voice wavered as he reached for his door handle and escaped the truck. "Come on. We got things we need to get done today."

Dodger glanced up at his rear view mirror to see Karn had already awoken and was watching Rauno with pained eyes. Dodger pretended to not notice as Karn fell back asleep. Dodger left the truck and gently shut the door behind him. He followed after Rauno, who had already made his way into the outdoor equipment shop.

The scent of synthetic materials and kerosene hung in the air like thick cologne. The front door chimed with a bell as it slowly closed on its own. Dodger squinted hard, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim, dull lighting. He could scarcely make out the tangled jungle of outdoor equipment that sprawled out all around him. As he followed Rauno and walked toward the back of the shop, he couldn't help but notice empty shelf after empty shelf.

"Good morning! Welcome," a strong yet mellow voice called out to them from the back of the room. "I hope you fellas aren't looking for camping gear. You wouldn't believe how busy we've been. We've nearly sold the entire shop!"