

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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Chapter XVII

Dodger approached the counter at the back of the shop, searching for the source of the voice. From somewhere in a backroom, through a doorway hidden behind hanging beads directly from the 60s, a voice called out again.

“One second, I’m just pouring myself a coffee!” after a rattling of metal and glass from the back room, a rosy cheeked man in his early 40’s with eyes clear and sharp like those of a falcon, stepped through the doorway. He hung the hanging beads back on a hook to leave the doorway clear. In his hand he tightly gripped a beautifully ornate mug, painted in deep blue and vibrant amber depicting a sweeping, mountainous landscape, along with bold letters stating something in Swedish. On his left forearm he wore thick, well-worn leather armor.

“Morning, Hunter,” Rauno said, leaning forward on the counter.

“Rauno! My favorite customer! And Dodger. Good to see you. How can I help you fellas?” Hunter cheerfully took a gulp from his mug which shimmered in the pale light of a small fridge behind the counter.

“Hey, Hunter. Good to see ya. I was just talkin’ with my buddy, Sparro. He said you had some good gear in stock,” Dodger said coyly, hiding his eyes behind his glasses.

“I’ll give you a good discount if you give me the recipe for your moose steak from the last festival. Man, I’ve been thinking of that steak for the last two weeks,” Hunter said, blowing onto his coffee to cool it after nearly burning his mouth.

“You know how many years I’ve been trying to get Dodger to tell me any of his moose steak recipes?” Rauno said, half joking, half serious.

“Well, Sparro said something about picking up a new tent here, but I forgot what he said. Uh, I’m not sure how many people could fit in the tent he bought. Would you happen to remember?” Dodger squinted from out of the corner of his eye as he turned to pretend to look at something on a shelf.

“Uhh.. hmm, you know, I’m not sure I remember,” Hunter apprehensively took a subtle step back as he held up his mug to cover his face. Rauno was about to say something until he noticed the look on Dodger’s face, knowing Dodger had a good hand of cards and was in the middle of playing them. He took a step away and pretending to check out some a nearly empty shelf with only a couple of sleeping bags.

“Sparro also said something about some two way radios. You know, I’m not real good with electronics so I’m not sure which ones he was talking about,” Dodger said, picking up a can of fuel for a backpacking stove. Hunter’s lips locked tight, his eyes peering hard at Dodger, trying to figure out why Dodger was asking about Sparro’s purchases. Hunter’s cheery demeanor subtly shifted into a stony, suspicious façade.

“We do a lot of transactions every day. You can’t remember the details of all those sales, you know,” Hunter said dryly, his Swedish accent just barely slipping through the cracks in his speech as he fought to hide his irritation.

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry to waste your time. I really liked that gear Sparro just bought, but if we can’t remember what the specific models were, I guess it’s a waste of time. Well, come on Rauno, let’s head out.” Dodger sighed with defeat, taking a few steps toward the door. His shoulders slumped in defeat, he set the can back on the shelf with a weak metallic clank. Just as Rauno turned around to follow, Dodger stopped in his tracks. Before Hunter could finish taking a breath of relief, Dodger slyly glanced back at him. “It’s just a shame. After Helen couldn’t fix that broken radio, they said it would be a problem if they couldn’t replace it.”

“Hey, wait a minute! Helen? Helen Sparta?” Hunter asked, utterly dropping his defenses in a fraction of a second. Dodger continued to make his way toward the front door. “Hold on, Dodger! What did you mean by that? What’s Helen got to do with all that?” Though Dodger’s face was totally concealed by the shadow cast from the brim of his baseball cap, Rauno could see a glimmer of a grin on Dodger’s face.

“Huh? Sparro didn’t tell you about it?” Dodger turned around, giving Hunter a deeply concerned look.

“No, he didn’t say who was going on the camping trip. He just said there was going to be maybe a dozen people or so. Helen’s on the camping trip too?” Hunter’s eyes went wide as his brow tensed.

“Yeah, when he got attacked by that weird animal, the two way radio broke. Helen tried to fix it, but the attack was so brutal, she said there was no way she could fix it. Didn’t you see that massive cut on Sparro’s arm? I wanted to pick up a replacement radio for them before heading back to the campsite. Oh well, never mind though,” Dodger’s shoulders slumped with disappointment as he slyly glanced over to give Rauno a look.

“Wait, what? Weird animals? Hey... where did you say the campsite was?” Hunter was just about jumping over the counter to reach Dodger.

“Where? Ahh, I couldn’t say. Sparro said what’s his name wanted us to keep the camping trip private. Who was it, Rauno? I forgot,” Dodger turned to Rauno, both men wearing bullet proof poker faces.

“Hmmm,” Rauno hesitated.

“Bull Brandish? Is that who Sparro was talking about?” Hunter’s knuckles were white from nearly crushing the mug in his hand to dust.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right, Bull Brandish. Well, Helen will be disappointed we couldn’t get a replacement radio. Anyway, thanks, Hunter,” Dodger shrugged.

“It’s time we head off, Dodger. We told them we wouldn’t be late getting back to Pascagoula Meadow,” Rauno said dryly.

“Wait, hold on! Pascagoula Meadow? Helen’s camping *there*? But that place is...” Hunter was barely able to stop himself from shouting.

“Yeah, sure is nice and safe there. Well, seeya around, Hunter,” Dodger nodded.

“Okay, look, it’s my policy to not talk about customers’ transactions. Not after I accidentally told that guy’s wife about... well, never mind. Sparro was here yesterday. I thought it was funny that he bought so much stuff, seeing as how he had never even been in the shop before. He didn’t seem to know exactly what he was looking for. He bought as many tents and sleeping bags as he could. First aid, cooking gear, portable toilets and showers, bear spray, you know, he nearly cleared our stock out. Who even needs that much bear spray? I asked him how long the camping trip would be but he said he didn’t know how long it would last. That’s pretty weird, right? Not knowing how long your camping trip will last isn’t something I’ve ever seen before,” Hunter stepped around the counter, walking close to Dodger as he kept his voice hushed. “Don’t tell anyone you got these details from me. Like I said, I never talk about customers’ details like this, but I didn’t realize Helen was involved. Look, if you need a replacement radio, I’ll get one for you. Cedar, come here!” With a low pitched whistle, the sound of a small tornado whipped up in the back room.

“Whoa! Ah! Oh jeepers!” a familiar, timid voice yelped from somewhere far in the back room. Carried by a deep sighing wind, the shape of a falcon elegantly drifted in through the doorway, coming to an easy rest on Hunter’s raised left arm. The falcon’s feathers shimmered lightly in the dull overhead light. Its eyes peered through Dodger, piercing through his shield entirely. Dodger and Rauno froze with shock. Hunter held up a laser pointer, casting the red dot onto a cardboard box high up on a shelf out of reach across the

room. “Go, Cedar. Grab,” Hunter commanded with a mellow voice. In mere seconds, the falcon shot across the entire length of building, grabbed the box, then dragged it back to Hunter, who smoothly picked it out of Cedar’s talons like picking an apple from a tree. The falcon’s wings fanned out with pride and majesty, as if showing off its glorious plumage to its visitors, as it landed back on Hunter’s arm. Hunter reached into the small fridge behind the counter and retrieved a strip of raw meat, rewarding the falcon for his efforts. Dodger’s jaw hung low with awe as Hunter set the falcon on a perch high above the cash register.

“Cool bird,” Rauno muttered, nodding with wonder.

“This is the last radio I’ve got in stock. It’s the same model that Sparro has been buying lately. If it’s for Helen, then tell her it’s from me, and tell her to be careful out there,” Hunter said softly, his eyes grew heavy as his gaze shifted to the dark corners of the room.

“Oh, guys! Fancy seein’ you here!” Willie ducked through the hanging beads, out of the back room. In his hand was a pale white mug which read “MUG” in bold black text.

“Hey there, Willie. It’s a small world, isn’t it?” Dodger said, processing the surprise of an actual falcon suddenly appearing, followed by Willie.

“I was just bringing Hunter here his regular shipment of Swedish coffee, ‘Solljus’. It’s got a great earthy aroma with a rose-like aftertaste. I think you’ll really like it. You wanna try some?” Willie cheerfully grinned as he ducked and twisted to untangle himself from a hanging bead chain that was trying to strangle him.

“That sounds good, but Rauno and I are in a bit of rush today. How about coffee later? Maybe I can stop by your place later real fast,” Dodger said, mentally mapping out the timing of his day.

“Oh, no can do. You wouldn’t believe how angry my wife is! Oh boy, she sure was right about to dill my pickle after I got home late last night drunker than a skunk! It’s a real bad idea to be at my house today,” Willie said as he just about skipped over to Dodger and Rauno.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Dodger muttered softly, thinking back to his years of coming home late after drinking and partying with the guys in town. Of all the times he came home after having a wild night, Karol never once criticized him or complained.

“Hey, it’s no big deal! It’s easy to deal with the ol’ ball and chain. You just gotta smile and nod and tune out and let her yell at you ‘til she gets it out of her system. Then you stay out of her way. I got people to see all day anyway and lots of nice exotic coffees to share, so I don’t mind one little bit,” Willie chirped as he took a sip of his coffee. Dodger’s eyes drooped low until they locked on to the wedding ring on his own hand. The weight of guilt pressed down on Dodger’s chest as he tried to imagine Karol getting mad at him for staying out late.

“You guys had some fun last night, huh? Wish I could have joined in. I guess those days are behind me. Stjärna’s got a baby in the oven now. I’ll have to be a big responsible dad now, hahaha! You can’t go out having fun when you need to

be a good parent at home, right?" Hunter blushed with pride, thinking about becoming a father for the first time.

"Yeah, sure. Of course not," Dodger just about whispered as he disappeared into his jacket. Rauno tapped the watch on his wrist and nodded toward Dodger. "Oh, right. We've gotta get moving. Thanks for the radio. I'll pass on the message to Helen for you."

"And tell Helen I mean it. Be careful. I can't... go there and help. I have to stay with Stjärna," Hunter said, his eyes tensing sternly.

"Of course," Dodger nodded, shouldering his increasingly heavy conscience as he and Rauno left the building. As they hopped back into the truck, Dodger sighed deeply, unable to take his eyes off his wedding ring.

"That was a hell of a bluff. What do you think that was all about? He really jumped when you mentioned Helen," Rauno said, looking back to see Karn still soundly asleep. Dodger started the truck and accelerated back onto the road, looking far past the windshield, beyond the trees, beyond the mountainside, staring into some time and place well beyond his reach.

"I used to see Hunter's truck parked in front of Helen's house all the time years ago when I drove home from work," Dodger answered, with something else clearly occupying his mind.

"You think they were having an affair?" Rauno asked, his brows perking up as he scratched his mustache.

“That’s none of my business!” Dodger snapped back quickly, unable to hide the fiery irritation in his voice. The dull hum of the engine and uneven rattling of the road below filled the truck with a tense din. Dodger grinded his teeth as the temperature in the truck increased steadily until he caught sight of the driveway in front of his friend, Bear Greentree’s, house. “Sorry,” Dodger muttered, forcing the accelerator down to speed past the house of his long time friend; a friend he hadn’t seen or heard from in almost two weeks. He took a deep breath and loosed his grip on the steering wheel. “You know those stories Slim was telling about that big explosion in the sky two weeks ago?”

“My friend, Danteo, was talking about that too,” Rauno answered, noticing Dodger’s reaction to seeing Bear’s house. Dodger slowed the truck to an uneasy stop as they reached a rusted old stop sign.

“One night at the bar, I saw Arnalt Weiss talking about lights in the night sky with both Hunter and Helen. When I overheard what they were talking about, I went over and asked Arnalt about it. Bear came into the bar and saw me talking to Arnalt, and since then, he’s been pissed off. He’s been avoiding me. Not answering calls,” Dodger took his foot off the break and gently eased on the accelerator, finally moving the truck forward past an intersection with a fork in the road.

“Well that explains it. Lots of people in town hate that guy. Do you believe what everyone says about Arnalt?” Rauno rolled down his window to let fresh air in.

“What, that he cheated on his wife with some floozy out of town at the bar? Well, Sarah left him. It must be true. You don’t get divorced for no reason. I just can’t understand why a man would do that to such a loving wife,” Dodger imagined what kind of pain that sort of thing would cause to Karol; how unfair that would be to her, how it would destroy her whole world. But what Arnalt did was a long time ago. Years ago. Back when Karol still needed Dodger. These days, would she even care? Dodger flipped his signal to the left as his truck rolled to a stop at another intersection. A sign to the left, pointing to a dirt road, read “Archer’s Lane, No Through Road,” while a sign directly ahead read “Burden Lake Campgrounds”. Dodger’s heart beat hard and fast against his chest as if racing the never-ending ticking of his truck’s signal. The truck’s engine idled anxiously, urging Dodger to make a decision.

“Going to see old man Honard, huh?” Rauno said, wondering what Dodger was waiting for. Dodger gulped hard as his hands trembled. A bead of sweat ran down his face as he pushed himself to reach over the distance of miles to turn off his turn signal. His stomach twisted into knots as he kicked down against the accelerator, causing the truck to buck forward like a wild horse. The engine roared with focused fervor. The truck sped down an ever-narrowing mountain run before following a tall wooden sign which read “Welcome to Burden Lake” down a humble dirt road. Over mud filled ruts, rocks and gravel, and loose pine needles, the truck came to a stop in a clearing in front of a two story log cabin building with an impressive high pitch roof. To the left, a smaller single story log building connected with a roof-covered wooden path extended as if reaching out to the thick forest all around.

As the truck engine shut off, only Dodger's throbbing heart could be heard. Gradually, the sounds of laughter grew as a crowd of excited and spirited campers walked around the large building toward the smaller one. Leading them was a woman with sunrise colored hair, eyes that shimmered like rocks resting just beneath the shore of an alpine lake, and rose colored lips that curled at the corners, ready to burst into laughter at any time. Dodger felt a tugging deep within his chest as he threw his door open and jumped out of his truck the way a child jumps out of bed on Christmas morning.

"Karol!" Dodger called out, his voice softer and lighter than it had been in weeks. The woman leading the group gracefully spun around upon hearing Dodger's voice, grinning from ear to ear.

"Dodger! My sweetheart! What are you doing here?" Karol giggled as she abandoned her group, sailing toward Dodger the way a dandelion rides the wind. She just about jumped as she landed in Dodger's arms. Early morning air swirled around them, kicking up dried pine needles and oak leaves as Dodger lightly set his hand on the back of Karol's head, pressing his lips hard against hers. She wrapped her arms around her husband's chest, squeezing him tight until he tickled her nose with his mustache, forcing her to laugh and release her grip.

"Just came here to kiss my wife," Dodger lightly rubbed Karol's shoulder as he peered deep into her eyes. His heart pounded desperately against his chest, not from anxiety or fear, but for different reasons altogether.

“Oh, awww, my sweet husband. You came all the way here to the middle of nowhere just for little ‘ol me?” Karol sang with a playful wild west accent.

“I’ll come anywhere, any time for you, little miss,” Dodger winked, mustering up a gruff, deep cowboy voice. He felt his body run hot as she playfully lightly tugged at his pants pocket. All the things he wanted to tell her rushed down upon his head like a waterfall. I felt impossible to reach up and grab any one thing to say as he melted in her arms. He wished he could tell her what had happened the night before, or even the night before that. He wished he could have told her about the explosion in the sky two weeks ago, and how a bunch of people had the electrical wiring melt in their homes. He wished he could have told her about how he and Bear had a falling out, and how he and Karn were coming good friends. He wanted to tell her how he and Iron shared a lime and pecan pie, and how he went up to Pullen’s Station and they had a weird light show after ordering a round of Honey Thunder, and how Dodger almost hit a little old man with a pool ball when he lost his temper because... he believed Karol no longer needed him.

Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and only said, “I love you.” A chorus of “awws” came from the group of campers standing at a distance, watching the two.

“Okay, you’ve got that look in your eye. What’s on your mind, sweetheart?” Karol said, giving Dodger a worried look.

“You uh... haven’t seen any... weird animals around the campsite, have you?” Dodger tried hard to put his words together in a way that wouldn’t sound suspicious.

“You mean like a squirrel?” Karol said, looking back at the group to shush them.

“No, not like that,” Dodger glanced back to see why there was rustling coming from his truck.

“What, have you seen a squirrel hold something with its little homunculus hands? If that’s not weird, I don’t know what is,” Karol glowed as Dodger admired her smile. She reached up and rubbed Dodger’s cheek. “So you’re growing a beard now, huh? Did you become a lumberjack since I’ve been away?” What could Karol have been talking about? Dodger had just shaved the morning before, so he couldn’t have grown a beard in that time.

Karon tickled Dodger’s chin as the campers giggling, trying to grab her attention. A middle aged man with the same work uniform as Karol stepped through a door from the smaller building and waved.

“Looks like your people need you. You go and have a great time with your friends,” Dodger took a step back and let Karol go.

“Sure thing. You have a great time with your friends too,” Karol leaned around Dodger and waved excitedly at Rauno sitting in the truck. “Alright, I better sort out fishing gear for these folks. I’ll be home soon enough but you come here and give me a kiss whenever you want,” Karol reached up and tickled Dodger’s beard one last time before skating back to her group of campers.

As Dodger reached his truck, he noticed a tall, dark skinned man with bright eyes and lively voice, wearing a forest

ranger's uniform, leaning in toward Rauno's window. Dodger barely caught a fragment of their conversation as he opened his door.

"I'm really sorry about having to cancel rock climbing next weekend. We're so short staffed with all these out of towners rushing up to the mountain and going missing, and all these UFO hunters. It's just been crazy," the forest ranger's shoulders slumped from bearing a terrible weight.

"Hey, don't worry about it, Danteo. No big deal. We can try again next weekend," Rauno said, hiding his disappointment from his friend behind a smile.

"Oh, Dodger! How are ya, boet? Haven't seen you in a while!" Danteo reached into the truck excitedly to shake Dodger's hand with a firm, confident grip.

"Good to see ya, partner. I'm great. Couldn't be better. How are things up at the station?" Dodger leaned over to greet Danteo.

"Well, I tell ya. Lots of funny guys just like Nickelas Dollarbuck are running around chasing stories of funny lights in the sky right now. And... animals have been aggressive this season. I was just checking on reports of some... funny animals seen around the campsite." Danteo's sing-songy voice faded into a deep, somber tone. "You guys should stay indoors for the time being. Cancel any fishing, camping, or hiking trips. I'm... serious about it. We don't have the resources to go drag more bodies out of the mountains." Danteo sighed as he looked away from the men in the car, his eyes drifting toward the deep shadows of the tree line. Dodger looked back to see

Karol wrangling her group of people, fighting back the thought of her encountering the creature from the steel mill.

“Sure, okay... we’ll be careful,” Rauno worriedly looked at Dodger, who was tightly gripping his keys just at the cusp of the ignition of the truck. Dodger could just about see the mangled abomination of a creature from the night before reflecting in Rauno’s weary eyes. Just as Danteo was about to leave, Dodger stopped him.

“Wait! Hold on. You said we shouldn’t do any camping trips for a while... is that a blanket statement or are there any locations that are safe?” Dodger asked.

“Sorry, we can’t make any exceptions. It’s an abnormally dangerous season. Why do you ask?” Danteo scratched his arm nervously.

“There’s a young lady back in town. She’s... stuck in a wheel chair. We promised to organize a camping trip for her. It doesn’t need to be rock climbing or anything exciting like what you and Rauno do,” Dodger explained. Hearing that, Rauno looked down at his hands. His muscles fell loose as he imagined what his life would be if he were stuck in a wheelchair. He wouldn’t get to ride a bike, or rock climb, or swim, or do any of the things that made him feel strong. If he couldn’t do those things, he truly would be weak, and he truly would be a coward.

“Aw, man, you’re breakin’ my heart. Alright, let me help you guys with that. I’ll check some maps when I get back to work. Give me a call tomorrow and I’ll help you find a safe spot close to town to set up camp,” Danteo said, holding his

chest as his knees buckled in an animated fashion. He shook hands with Rauno before leaving.

As Dodger's truck rumbled back down the dirt road leading away from the campsite, Karn stirred.

"Well, slap my tallywhacker! How did I get here?" Karn looked around, wide awake, confused, but happy to be there.

"You feelin' alright, partner?" Dodger looked back at Karn through the rear view mirror. "You fell asleep while we were grabbing a bite at The Frying Saucer last night."

"Shucks, we didn't even have that much to drink last night," Karn tried to shake the clouds from his head.

"Morning. You should have something to eat," Rauno said, reaching back to shake Karn's hand.

"Now that you mention it, I'm downright famished. I wouldn't mind a burger from the ol' Chunky Chicken," Karn said as he searched around for the bandana and goggles that fell off his head at some point during the drive.

The three men made casual conversation until they reached the familiar old white build with a big sign up top which read, "Chunky Chicken." Much to Karn's dismay, the fast food restaurant was not open. On the front door was a hand written paper sign that read, "Sorry. No staff today. Closed." The suspicion of the situation was compounded when Dodger knocked on the sheriff's office to find the building locked. Without even the faintest scent of Sheriff Moss's freshly baked cookies, it seemed the office hadn't even opened for the day. An uneasy silence fell upon on the men as they realized there were very few cars around the main

street of town that morning. The first sign of life they detected was Fort, who was driving back from the hardware store, heading back to Dodger's house.

"Hey, guys, fancy meeting you here," Fort nearly jumped out of his car before it came to a complete stop. In his hand, he held a backpack weighed down by some heavy contents. "I picked up all the stuff you asked for, but some weird stuff is going on in town. I was at Rendlesham Hardware and Dee didn't show up to work. She didn't call in sick. They can't get her on the phone. She's never missed a day of work before! My boss asked me to come in to work today to fill in her shift," Fort slightly flinched, waiting for Dodger's reaction. "But- it's alright! I'll tell them I can't go in to work. I mean, I need to help you guys find Bull's campsite. I'm the only one familiar with the area, so, you need me to go with you."

"No, that's the wrong thing to do. When your workplace needs you, you can't let them down. The rest of your co-workers will suffer and have to work extra hard if you abandon them like that," Dodger spoke firmly with a fatherly tone. Fort sighed, accepting that Dodger was right.

"Yeah, you're right. You guys go on without me. There's a map in the bag. I drew the spot where I think they likely set up camp. I... guess I'll hear back from you whenever you get back to town," Fort smiled though his eyes betrayed his cool attitude. He was a poor poker player who could not hide his disappointment. Dodger stood tall, looking down at Fort trying his hardest to put on a strong façade. Dodger could not help but remember himself as a young man, wishing he could go hunting with his childhood hero and family friend, Honard Hall, the world famous archer.

“What time does your shift finish?” Dodger asked.

“What? Well, I’d probably finish up work around 5:00pm,” Fort replied, wide eyed.

“Alright. We’ll take the extra time to prepare and wait for you to finish work,” Dodger said with his cool, distant attitude. Fort’s eyes glowed with admiration as he struggled to contain a great big smile.

“Okay! I gotta rush back to the shop! I’ll see you guys as soon as I get off work!” Fort rushed back into his car and drove down the street to return to Rendlesham Hardware. Karn looked up at Dodger with reverence, a smile on his face curled up his mustache with unmistakable delight. Rauno watched in awe as he wondered if his advice to Dodger the other night had actually made a difference. Dodger carried the heavy bag back to the truck, setting it down in the bed with a resounding clatter.

“Shucks, I’m wastin’ away to skin and bones here,” Karn mumbled as his stomach emitted a miserable gurgling.

“You sure the kid got all the gear on the list?” Rauno asked. Dodger opened the bag and rifled through the contents, making note of the various kinds of firearm ammunition, emergency outdoor tools, batteries, headlamps, first aid kits, and emergency dried food packs. Among the piles of equipment there sat one extra item; the moon pie that Dodger always picked up on his way out of the hardware store. He couldn’t stop himself from smiling as he took the moon pie from the bag and looked back down the road toward the direction Fort had just driven off.

Chuckling, Dodger handed the moon pie to Karn before walking to the Doctor's office just a stone's throw away from where he had parked. He tried the front door, only to find it locked tight. At this point, there was no denying something was going wrong in his town, and now there was no way he would let anything stop him from getting to the bottom of it.

Just as Dodger was about to step back into his truck, the sound of tires rolling heavily down the road caught his attention. He looked westward down Main Street to see Iron's truck pull into the parking lot, lurching unsteadily across three different parking spaces. Iron crawled out of his truck to greet the three men.

All across his face, forearms, and hands, scratches and cuts tore through the surface of his leathery, hardened skin, revealing underneath the blood and flesh of an exhausted old man who had just finally accepted he had wasted the entirety of his life believing he could pretend his happiness into existence. His still running blood dripped with each of his belabored steps. Though he was still alive, Iron had been mutilated by a monster; not the kind in campfire stories or horror movies, but the kind that only truly exists in real life.