

Silver Falls

# Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

Jerrel Dulay

## Chapter XVIII

The calming scent of lavender and maple syrup belied the heavy sense of pain in the kitchen. As Tira navigated through the newly painted, country-eggshell white cabinets, and newly installed stovetop to prepare cups of coffee, Iron Austin, a man who had endured 35 years of pain with stoic fortitude, sat with trembling hands and broken resolve. The blood from his arms and face dripped onto the freshly polished, hand-made mahogany dining table. Hurriedly, Karn darted across the kitchen, coming to a sudden stop to carefully, gently pat Iron's wounds apprehensively as if reaching from across a distant expanse. Iron flinched, briefly making pained eye contact with Karn.

"Sorry," Karn looked away, wincing as if expecting to be yelled at.

"It's fine. It's not as bad as it looks," Iron sighed, his breath leaving his body the way the final wind of winter blows across an exhausted landscape. "It ain't the first time I been a punching bag for her." Dodger stared firmly, studying the broken expression on Iron's face.

"Jeez, man. Let me take a look at those cuts. You might even need stitches," Tira called out from across the kitchen, eyeing Iron while she quickly poured coffee across multicolored mugs with one hand. With the other hand, she cracked three eggs into a pan on the stove.

“It’s not a big deal. I’m used to it by now,” Iron answered, his weathered, rough voice trembling. He looked up to finally take in his surroundings; a beautifully furnished kitchen with framed paintings and dried flowers adorned the walls which felt warm with the color of the summer sun. Countless photographs of a family of four hung proudly on the walls; a mother and father beaming with pride and adoration for their two daughters made each photo glow even in the gentle morning light. It seemed as if everyone in the world had a happy family except for Iron. “I guess I should have left a long time ago, you know? It don’t matter what I do. She’ll never change the way she feels about me. A man’s gotta know when he’s in a fight he can’t win. It’s... probably about time I call it quits. I ain’t going back there. I ain’t gonna let her break me no more,” Iron gritted his teeth, his words hardening as he spoke.

“What!? You’re gonna leave your wife!? But... aren’t you worried about being alone?” Karn just about leaped out of his seat. The sizzling sound of something being seared over high heat accentuated the cracking of his voice.

“I’m too old for this kind of game. Maybe women ain’t for me anymore,” Iron sighed, his body rushing with adrenaline and boiling blood as, after years of guilty contemplation and empty self promises, he had finally made the decision to take control of his life.

“What!? But... you’re married! You gotta try to make it work somehow!” Karn’s voice hit the ceiling as he inadvertently gripped Iron’s forearm like a clamp. Iron flinched. Somewhere deep behind Karn’s old blue eyes were

the reflection of something lost, something broken many years ago.

“I ain’t going back there. It’s over,” Iron muttered.

“Well, if you need it, I got a guest room you can stay in ‘til you sort things out,” Dodger set down his mug with a definite thud, punctuating his words. For a moment, Rauno grimaced, thinking of the guest room in Dodger’s house that Rauno himself would stay in from time to time. The drawers in that guest room still stored extra clothes for Rauno. Now it was going to be Iron’s room. Rauno just about kicked himself, trying to shake some sense of jealousy that he knew made no sense, yet he couldn’t help but feel the ever tightening grip of.

“Sure. It’s taken you all these years and you still couldn’t leave? You could have left any time you wanted, but cowards are always afraid of being alone,” Rauno just about spit, leaning back in his seat on the far side of the table, staring down at Iron. Steam was nearly visibly rising up from beneath Rauno’s shirt collar. For a moment, the room became uncomfortably hot as Tira silently, gently, set the coffee mugs down on the table. When the smell of burning bacon started to muddy the air, Tira rushed back to the stove to tend to Karn’s breakfast. A heavy moment passed before Iron spoke again.

“Yeah. Rauno, I guess you’re right. I am a coward. That’s all there is to it,” Iron answered, barely able to lift his eyelids. His eyebrows weighed down his eyes as she struggled to look up at Rauno, sitting hundreds of miles away at the other end of the table. Rauno almost audibly gasped at Iron’s

reaction, unable to comprehend how Iron could so willingly admit such a thing.

Dodger held up his coffee mug to his tense, confused face, struggling to understand how a woman could treat her husband the way Iron's wife had done. For a second, Dodger glanced down to his mug to see a familiar wolf jumping up at the moon, taking some comfort in recognizing his regular coffee mug he always drinks out of when visiting Tira's family. Through his mind, Dodger ran all kinds of potential scenarios where his own wife might treat him in such a way, but no such situation made sense to him. He just could not process it. After sipping his original blend Frontier Coffee, he finally spoke, "I just don't understand it. Why would she treat you like that?"

"You're a good man, Dodger. Good men like you have never seen what real evil looks like. You should try to keep it that way. If you've ever had to stare evil right in the eyes, it changes you. It breaks you," Iron spoke, averting his gaze with some heavy shame.

Karn rifled through a first aid kit that Tira handed to him and carefully plucked out bandage wrapping and medical tape. His hands trembled nervously as he delicately wiped away the blood from Iron's wounds, sitting at arm's length as if trying to avoid making direct physical contact.

"If a man can't stay strong and give reassurance to the people in his life when he faces hardship... well... no woman in her right mind could love a coward like me," Iron hung his head, then noticing how far away Karn seemed. Iron extended his left arm out to put it comfortably with Karn's reach as Karn

gently stretched out a bandage. Dodger glanced from out the corner of his eye to see Rauno deflating, bewildered that Iron would not fight back against his criticism. Was it the sound of Rauno's teeth grinding that he heard, or was it the sizzling of bacon on the stove? Dodger felt a sharp pain in his chest as he imagined a situation where he would decide to simply walk away from his marriage with Karol; it was brutally unthinkable.

"Things just didn't work out, and that's all there is to it. You know, Tira, your folks look so happy together in all those photos," Iron muttered, his dry voice barely escaping the barren desert landscape of his throat. He hadn't even touched his coffee yet.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you guys about," Tira spoke firmly, her voice steady and clear as if she were speaking over radio transmissions while at work. "My dad didn't come home last night. Mom acted like it wasn't a big deal but it's obvious there's something that isn't right."

Dodger squinted with curiosity from behind his coffee mug as Tira walked away from the stove and reached into the shadows of the storage closet beneath the stairs and retrieved an old cardboard box. The box landed on the table with a surprisingly heavy thud. For a split second, Tira looked over her shoulder, as if by reflex, to check if anyone was going to catch her looking through her parent's old stuff; things that maybe her parents wanted to keep hidden.

"Look, there are some old photos in here. My parents never let me put these in frames or scrapbooks but they never explained why," Tira said almost out of breath as she furiously rummaged through old magazines and papers. She gently

picked up a handful of old photos from the box and spread them out across the table.

“Whoa, look at that hair. Is that really your dad?” Karn chuckled as he analyzed the photos.

“I might want to hide my old photos if I had hair like that back then,” Dodger muttered under his breath.

“We don’t have time for jokes,” Tira explained quickly. Her easygoing, playful demeanor was gone. She had shifted gears fully into work mode. “Look. I’ve wondered about this for years. Look in this photo of my dad and Wood Wheeler back in the 80s. There, see them in this photo?”

“Hey, that’s... my dad!” Iron stood up excitedly, knocking his chair back with a resounding roar.

“Where? Oh, I see... gee, you look so much like him,” Karn’s eyes carefully drifted back and forth between the photo and Iron’s face, picking out the similarities between father and son.

“Yeah, there. So Wood Wheeler and your dad were in my old man’s logging crew? Go figure,” Iron scratched at his beard as fiery life returned to his soul. “Maybe I oughta have a chat to them sometime.”

“That’s not the point,” Tira said, rearranging the photos in some kind of order. “Look between these two photos. In this first one, there’s a gnarly tree right here next to the logging cabin. Okay, now look at this next photo. It looks like it was taken shortly after. The rest of the environment looks the same, but that tree is gone.”

“They’re a logging crew, aren’t they? They would have just cut down that tree,” Karn explained, leaning over to analyze the photos more closely.

“Why waste their time doing that? Logging crews are always under pressure to get a certain amount of work done in a certain amount of time, right? The tree that’s missing in the second photo is all twisted and gnarly. It wouldn’t make for good timber. It’d be time consuming for them to cut that tree down. Plus there is no stump where the tree would have been,” Tira reported efficiently, her voice seemingly deeper than normal. “Look, I’ve found other photos here. You can see the stumps of the pine trees they’ve felled. The stumps are visible like this.”

“So what are you saying? This sounds like the stories from Golden Ridge Ranch?” Dodger set down his mug and leaned over the photos, forgetting the sensitive subject he had brought up.

“That’s ridiculous. They’re just stories. There ain’t no such thing as monsters,” Iron grunted, dropping heavily back into his seat.

“It’s not just that,” Tira stared intensely at Iron, snapping him to attention. She took a depth breath to slow down before grabbing the coffee pot from the counter and setting it into the middle of the table, offering the others to pour themselves a refill. “When I was just a kid, Bull Brandish came over to my house late one night to talk to my dad. I heard him mention some things called Undertakers. At first I thought they meant like in a funeral home, but then I heard them talk about something called Wood Walkers. Then



suddenly Bull forced my dad to take two weeks off work. They went on a trip somewhere, but my dad never talked about that trip or what they did.”

“That’s an awfully specific thing to remember,” Dodger continued to stare at the photos spread across the table while pouring himself another cup of coffee. His hand trembled with some pain from their altercation in the steel mill the night before.

“Of course I remember it clearly. That’s the reason why I started doing babysitting work. My little sister, Penny, wanted to go to school science camp. Because of those two weeks my dad had to take off work, my parents fell behind with their bills and they wouldn’t be able to afford Penny’s science camp. And... that’s when you offered to let me babysit Dahlia.” Tira gently lifted two more photos out of the box, setting them some distance away from the others, making a mental note to keep track of them. In the photos, two girls in their early teens smiled excitedly, surrounded by towering redwood trees in a sprawling landscape. “It was thanks to you I was able to earn enough money and I was able to send both Penny and Analise to science camp. Because, you know, Analise’ mom was in the hospital and her dad...” Tira’s voice faltered, suddenly returning to the sound of a vulnerable, uncertain teenager. Some thin, wispy smoke drifted wearily through the kitchen as Tira’s voice grew tight.

“Yeah, sure, of course I remember,” Dodger cleared his throat confidently as if to distract Tira from having to address a difficult subject. “It sure has been a long time since then.”

“Two nights ago my dad was there with Bull Brandish leaving the bar,” Tira’s eyes pleaded with Dodger to understand what she was trying to say. “Look at the weird stuff that’s happened the past couple of days. Bull knows something we don’t, and now my dad is wrapped up in all this. Wherever my dad is, I’m sure he’s in danger and Bull has something to do with it.”

“Alright. That makes sense. Well. We’re heading out today. We think we might know where to find Bull,” Dodger said reassuringly as he nodded to Tira. He watched Karn finish bandaging Iron’s arms, both of whom seemed to think Karn had done a fine job. “Hey, Rauno, Karn seems all better now. Why not give his Starglass back,” Dodger said as plainly as possible, watching carefully to see if Karn would have any visible reaction. Rauno stood up and cautiously reached into his left shirt pocket and grabbed something before his eyes went wide. After hesitating, he withdrew his hand and then reached down into his pants pocket to retrieve Karn’s Starglass. With his head kept low, Rauno walked around the table, avoiding making eye contact with Iron as if in shame. How could he so brazenly call a man a coward when he himself could never possibly admit such a thing. Rauno delicately held the Starglass in front of Karn, handling it by a necklace string as if afraid to make contact with it.

“Oh, neat! My Starglass. Did I drop it or something?” Karn grinned gleefully as he set his glass sculpture back into his pocket. “Oh, Tira, I noticed you’re still wearing those rocket ship Starglass earrings I made for you!” Karn clapped with excitement, overjoyed to see someone enjoying his work.

“Well, of course! They’re my favorite earrings,” the room seemed to illuminate as Tira beamed, posing with her hands flared out fabulously. She lightly turned her head, smiling to illuminate her earrings. Each masterfully crafted sculpture depicted a rocket rising up to the moon, casting the morning light across the room with prismatic brilliance.

“Hey, do you need any help with any injuries you might have got last night?” Iron said, finally taking a big, eager gulp from his plain white mug that read “MUG” in simple black lettering.

“Huh? No, I’m totally fine,” Tira brushed off the comment as she carefully packed the old photos back into the box they came from. The room heated up as the crackling of burning bacon filled the air.

“Are you sure? You took a pretty bad fall down those stairs last night. I thought you could have broken a bone from a tumble like that,” Iron leaned forward as if to get a closer look.

“No, nothing like that happened. Didn’t even get a scratch,” Tira quickly mumbled as she packed the cardboard box away back into the closet. Dodger turned to watch her, noticing that indeed, she seemed totally unscathed. He briefly caught Rauno looking away, desperate to hide some sense of shame that he did not go into the steel mill with Dodger and the others.

“Oh dear! My eggs and bacon. I hope they aren’t burning,” Karn said delicately, trying to not sound too pushy.

“Oh, right, sorry. Your breakfast should be ready,” Tira said as she hastily shoveled the contents of the pan on the stove onto a beautifully ornate ceramic plate.

The room settled to a calm as Karn heartily chomped down on his bacon and eggs. As Iron finished his coffee, a terrible pounding rattled the entire house. Dodger jumped up, reflexively reaching for the throwing knives on his belt. Rauno snapped to attention, his eyes locking onto the front door like an eagle. From outside, some frenzied, muffled voice shouted out something incoherent.

Tira rushed to the door to find a scruffy older man, unshaven, with bloodshot eyes, unkempt hair, and a jacket that was buttoned up unevenly. She recognized such a broken, disheveled man in an instant. It was her great uncle, Million Dollarbuck. Behind him, another familiar figure towered above him, blocking the sunlight from breaching the front door.

“I saw your trucks parked out front. Dodger, you here?” Million stumbled into the house unsteadily as his wiry voice creaked out. The other figure sauntered on in afterward with a swagger. The large man eyed the antique farming and wood carving tools hanging on the walls as if assessing their sale value.

“Nice pad,” Steel grinned, expecting to be greeted gratefully by the people inside.

“Yep. I’m here. And great. You brought Steel Hart too,” Dodger muttered plainly as he got up from his seat and walked toward Million.

“The kid. Rominic. You seen him?” Million pleaded desperately, his demeanor weak and pathetic in a way that Tira had never seen before. She audibly gasped at the state Million was in.

“Rominic? The kid who was at the bonfire behind the bar? The chunky chicken kid?” Dodger pretended to not notice Million’s broken state, but he was knocked back by the pervasive stench of liquor coming from Million’s breath.

“Yeah. The kid! He didn’t come in to work this morning. He was supposed to start work at 8 am but he didn’t show up!” Million croaked. His shoulders slumped as he struggled to maintain his balance.

“Hey, just relax, baby,” Karn shrugged as he shoved breakfast in his mouth, “young men are like that. Sometimes they’re just late to work, and sometimes they forget they have a shift and don’t show up.”

“Not Rominic. That kid is always on time. He never misses work, and he never makes excuses. He’s not here. I don’t know where he is. I have to find him,” Million pleaded as he stumbled to the kitchen table, his words barely able to stand on their own.

“Jeez, pops. Why you so obsessed with him?” Steel crossed his arms and smirked, “An old lonely fella like you? You some kind of sugar daddy for a hot young Mexican man, huh?”

Like a bolt of lightning had struck, Million’s eyes awoke with searing fire. As Million whipped around with clenched fists, his boots hit the hardwood floor with renewed balance

and the sound of thunder. In an instant, his pathetic desperation had been tempered into an electric rage. Million's piercing eyes pinned Steel in place like two barrels of a shotgun.

"What the fuck did you just say?" Million growled, his voice rumbling like a storm cloud on the verge of bursting.

"Relax, pops. It's just a joke—" Steel tried to laugh it off, but Million cut him off.

"You shut your useless fucking mouth! If you ever talk like that again, I'll knock your teeth out and shove 'em so far down your throat, you'll think your asshole is your new mouth!" Million roared, his thunderous voice rumbling the family photos hanging on the walls. Steel disappeared into his jacket as his eyes nearly filled with tears of fear. Million took a seismic, thunderous step toward Steel. "Get the fuck out of here before you really make me mad."

"But... I drove you here and—" Steel whimpered.

"I said get out of my face, you useless piece of shit!" Million just about rumbled the entire house as he clenched his fists. The overweight man flinched, shutting his eyes as he scampered away, terrified of incurring the wrath of someone he knew he had no right to fight back against.

Tira's face wrenched in horror, aghast at how cruel Million had been to Steel. However unpleasant Steel was, no one deserved to be yelled at like that. Still, Tira understood something was wrong. For her entire life, she had never seen Million show worry or concern for anyone; especially not for her father or sister, who were related to Million by blood.

“Dodger, please,” Million’s momentary strength had collapsed in the blink of an eye. Just as Million’s knees gave way beneath him, Iron caught him with stony hands and set him carefully down on a kitchen chair. “You been askin’ around about that Bull Brandish, haven’t ya? I seen him snoopin’ around and talkin’ to Rominic over the past couple days, all hushed and secret like. It was like he didn’t want nobody hearing what they was talkin’ about. Let me ask you. Any of you heard from Tafford Weatherstone this week?”

“Uhh, he lives out past the Frying saucer, doesn’t he?” Karn eagerly shoveled the last of his sunny side up eggs into his mouth.

“Yeah. Out in the desert. Dodger, you sold him that dog last week, didn’t ya?” Million asked as he blindly reached for a coffee mug that Tira set down on the table in front of him.

“Three weeks ago,” Dodger sipped at his coffee. “Artax. That was a real good dog.”

“Well, Rominic was delivering food to Tafford for the past couple weeks. The guy was going crazy. Refused to leave his house. Rominic said late one night he went to deliver food and some weird stuff went down. He said some animal came out of the desert and attacked him. Said he got back in his car and then the thing chased him down the road. Now I figured it was just some coyote or wild hog. You know, kids get a scared of things in the dark. But then I seen Bull talkin’ to the kid. You heard about the weird shit that went down in the 70s, right? Butch’s dad got torn to shreds by some animal on the Brandish property. Bull’s grandpa got his arm ripped off, and

Willie Belgrade even lost his eye. Then that fella, Cap Gadocio got ripped in half," Million stared into the shadows of the room as he bit into his coffee.

"Oh no, Cap wasn't killed in the 70s. That was in the 90s when Fred got hurt too," Karn added, his eyes widening suddenly as he quickly clamped his mouth shut to stop himself from saying anything else.

"Is that when we went to look for the kid that Eli Goodwin kidnapped?" Rauno asked as he moved himself closer to the group, sitting down between Karn and Dodger.

"No, no, no. That was something else. Cap died the night those two kids found that messed up bear and..." Karn's voice trailed off uneasily.

"That Bull, he's bad news. Wherever he goes, trouble follows, and people get hurt. Now he's dragged Rominic into whatever weird shit he gets into. You find out anything 'bout Bull? You know where he is?" Million pleaded, nearly crushing his coffee mug in his grip.

"Maybe. We might have a lead. We're heading out to Pascagoula Meadow later. We think he might have a camp set up there. We're just getting our gear together right now," Dodger said calmly, trying to rub away the pain in his bandaged hand.

"Hey, Uncle Million, this might be a bit dangerous," Tira treaded apprehensively, lightly setting her hand on Million's shoulder as she sat down next to him. "There was this weird... animal last night, and there's stories about Pascagoula Meadow."



“That don’t matter! That’s my ki-,” Million cut himself off suddenly, his eyes grew wide and darted around the room as if he were desperately searching for an escape. He hunched over like a hurt animal. “That’s my best employee. He’s a good worker. I can’t let Bull get him killed.”

“We think Bull has Tira’s dad with him, too. Falcon hasn’t shown up to work in the diner for at least the past week,” Dodger said, picking up his mug and setting it into the kitchen sink. Tira moved hastily to and from a storage closet, bringing out large, internal frame backpacks and boxes of camping equipment.

“Bad idea for a camping trip right now. My friend is a ranger up the mountain. He just told us it’s a dangerous season right now. Animals going aggressive and attacking people,” Rauno half refilled his mug.

“We all heard the rumors. The same kind of weird shit that happened on the Brandish property happened on Golden Ridge Ranch too. You’re Dan Austin’s nephew right? What do ya know about the ranch?” Million pushed harshly toward Iron, his eyes piercing through Iron’s shield.

“I don’t know. They’re just stories is all. Bull used to come around the ranch from time to time but I never knew what he and my uncle talked about,” Iron reached for one of the backpacks on the table, emptying out the contents and organizing them into a distraction to avoid having to continue the topic with Million.

“So what do you think is happening? Maybe Bull is sacrificing people to appease these bloodthirsty animals,”

Rauno said nonchalantly as he stood up and filtered through the piles of camping equipment scattered across the table.

“Rauno!” Tira muttered as Million gasped with panic at the thought.

“So who do we know has been seen hanging around with Bull lately? Hogan’s grandson, Henry’s daughter, the sheriff, Tira’s dad, the owner of the lumberyard, and Million’s employee... What use could all those folks be to a shut-in loner like Bull, I wonder,” Dodger leaned over the table, sorting the camping equipment into groups of similar objects. “You know anything about their little club, Karn?”

“What? Uhhh, no, I don’t know nothing about... any of that sort of... thing,” Karn’s eyes darted left and right, frantically trying to recall anything he might have said the night before after having a few drinks.

“I hate to say it, but you know who has stories about all these places,” Dodger sighed, making wary eye contact with everyone in the room.

“Don’t say it,” Million covered his red eyes with weathered, unsteady hands.

“Slim Roberts,” Dodger said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, heeeere we go,” Million threw his hands up with expasperation.

“Heeeey, I like all those campfire stories,” Tira shot back.”

“Those stories are pretty fun by a campfire,” Rauno shrugged, setting batteries and headlamps off to one corner of the table. His voice could barely be heard over the crackling of the plastic casing that he wrestled to remove from the two way radio he and Dodger had picked up from the outdoor shop earlier that morning.

“That dumb asshole thinks Bigfoot is trying to steal his bank account details,” Million grunted.

“Okay, yeah, well... alright that’s...” Tira froze, before breaking out into an uncontrollable giggle as she pictured the scenario in her mind.

“Doesn’t Nickelas Dollarbuck have a UFO museum up the mountain? Our bartender up in Pullen’s Station used to talk about it all the time,” Iron said, setting aside a pile of emergency dried food to his corner of the table.

“Oh, yeah, my cousin. I’ve never actually seen his museum. Maybe we could drive up and talk to him,” Tira piled up the first aid equipment into the middle of the table.

“Godamnit, that kid. He’s got squirrels in the brain. You wanna know what he came around and gave me for my birthday once?” Million grunted, slamming his mug back down onto the table. Karn gave Dodger a sly look from the corner of his eye, the grin beneath his mustache glimmering in the pale morning light. Karn slowly brought his hand up, pointing his index finger straight up, before suddenly jabbing toward the ceiling. He grimaced and squinted as if in pain. Dodger lost grip of his stoic disposition, spitting his coffee onto the table as a smile stretched uncontrollably across his face.

“Heeey, come on you guys! My dad just polished this table,” Tira scolded, handing a cup coaster to Million and paper towels to Dodger.

“A butt plug! Nickelas gave me a butt plug. Who gives their uncle a butt plug for his birthday? And you wanna know what his explanation was?” Million squinted ever harsher as his brows just about raised up to the ceiling.

“Aliens?” Dodger and Karn loudly whispered in unison.

“Was it aliens?” Rauno said plainly.

“Alien abduction, huh?” Tira sighed.

“Aliens. The kid said it was to protect me from alien abduction. What in tarnation!” Million’s voice rose to an unsteady crescendo.

“Well, maybe it was because he grew up listening to all those stories Arnalt and Hogan used to tell about how your brother went missing,” Rauno’s voice rang out like a fatal gunshot. The room fell silent as Dodger’s eyes went wide with horror, looking over his shoulder toward Rauno.

“D-... Don’t you fucking talk to me about those two assholes,” Million whimpered, barely able to make the words pass through his quivering mouth. “If it wasn’t for those two... my brother would still be alive.”

Karn’s shoulders snapped back tightly with the sound of a cocking gun. He gritted his teeth hard, just barely able to stop himself from saying something he knew he would regret.

“He didn’t mean it like that,” Tira gasped, covering her mouth in shock. She gave Rauno a tense look, as if to label Million’s brother as a forbidden topic. “Come on. Let’s stay focused on getting our equipment packed.” She marched across the room and grabbed another storage box full of outdoor equipment. She started to lift it but was surprised to find it much heavier than it should have been. Noticing this, Dodger walked over to help her move the box. “Thanks, Dodger. That’s weird. It’s not normally this heavy.” They set the box next to the table, and when they removed the lid, a familiar scent of oil and a dull glint caught Rauno’s attention. Instead of the expected array of camping equipment, the box was stacked full to the brim with firearms and crossbows of all kinds. Tira dropped the box lid and stepped back in shock.

“What the-!?” Tira gasped.

“Well, that’s not how you’re supposed to store those,” Rauno sipped at his coffee.

“Hot summer Suzy. That’s a hell of a lot of firepower,” Iron’s eyes glimmered, wondering what kinds of toys there might be in the box. “So your dad’s really into guns, huh?” Iron imagined sitting and having a chat with Tira’s dad. For his entire life, Iron had wanted to collect guns, but his wife would never have allowed such an expensive, useless hobby.

“He’s never owned this many guns before! The only guns he and my mom own are two revolvers that they take camping. Dad only ever fires that gun at the range when target shooting with Uncle Wood,” Tira’s hands hovered over the pile of weapons, unsure of how to process the situation.

“Hey, I been thinking. The word Undertakers does sound familiar. The other day, Bull asked me what I knew about some Undertakers. My uncle, Dan, before he shot himself... I’d heard him mention that word before. You fellas reckon it could be some kind of animal that Bull is hunting?” Iron slipped a shovel and various tools into a backpack. He scanned across the table, searching for any other equipment he may need to pack into the bag. After a moment, with his eyes looking away, Rauno sheepishly handed a first aid kit to Iron, who nodded and set the kit into his backpack.

“Holy hell... Is this stuff even legal? And that thing, is that a sub machine gun?” Dodger’s eyes went wide as Million grabbed gun after gun and set it on the table.

“I don’t even want to think about where these came from,” Tira collapsed into her chair. Karn quietly shrank into his shirt as he stared out the windows of the living room as if looking for someone.

“Alright. Everyone grab a gun. We’re going after Bull,” Million sorted out the guns, placing the most powerful looking weapons on his seat.

“Whoa, easy there, partner,” Dodger stepped close to Million, holding his palms out to try to slow Million down. “These don’t belong to us and we don’t even know what we’re getting into. You’re going at this a bit too headstrong. Let’s just take a breath.”

Million wanted to bite back, but he was caught in Dodger’s stony, towering gaze. He clenched his jaw tightly, realizing Dodger was right.

“Let’s go and drive up to see Nickelas and see what he’s heard about those Undertakers or whatever,” Dodger zipped up a backpack and set it on the ground. Rauno finished unpacking the two-way radio they had picked up earlier that morning.

“Why we gotta waste time? Let’s go directly to the meadow now,” Million grunted. Dodger locked eyes with him and gave him steadfast glare.

“Fort, the young man from the hardware shop. He helped us track down Bull’s location. Fort’s gotta work until 5 but I told him we wouldn’t leave without him. We’re not leaving without Fort.” Dodger stated plainly. Million’s face softened as he took a deep breath and gave Dodger a look of understanding.

“Alright, let’s go see Nickelas,” Iron quickly stood up and nearly fell over as he struggled to regain his balance.

“Hey, be careful! You might have a concussion,” Tira quickly reached out to grab Iron’s arm to steady him.

“We don’t got time to worry about things like that,” Iron grunted toughly. Dodger scanned the room, watching as Rauno finished fitting batteries into the radio.

“Iron, why don’t you do me a favor and hunt through some radio frequencies. See if you can pick up any conversations from anyone who might be communicating with Bull,” Dodger stood up and pushed his chair into the table with finality. “Rauno, would you stay here and finish packing our equipment?”

Rauno nodded easily. Iron read the situation, knowing he wouldn't be able to argue.

"Alright, let's go," Million mumbled as he emptied his coffee mug.

"You stay here and sober up. There ain't no point in you coming along to see Nickelas unless you wanna get an earful about aliens," Dodger spoke firmly. His voice pressed Million firmly back into his seat.

Tira pushed the box of weapons back into a closet as Karn put on his coat and walked out the front door, gritting his teeth and watching Million from the corner of his eye.

"We'll be back soon." Dodger said as he stepped out the front door into the cool, purple morning air. As he left, he caught a glimpse of Rauno handing the two way radio to Iron as Million passed out on a couch in the living room. Karn offered Tira the front seat, but she politely declined, already stepping into the passenger seat on the left side of Dodger's truck. Karn hopped into the front passenger seat just as Dodger swiftly grabbed the moon pie, saving it from being crushed. With a determined grunt, the engine roared to a start, and with windows partially rolled down to let in the fresh autumn air, they began their drive up Hill road toward Nickelas' house.

The FM radio offered a barely audible hum of static, which occasionally drifted into indiscernible mutterings of some talk back radio station. They had driven about half way up the mountain when Karn could feel the ever increasing weight of Dodger watching him through his peripheral vision.



“Hey, Dodger, I uh... I got something to tell ya,” Karn spoke softly, as if trying to hide what he had to say from Tira in the back seat. She was totally absorbed, studying some crumpled old topographic map.

“Alright, what do ya got?” Dodger answered with cool nonchalance as he kept his eyes on the road.

“There’s something I never told you about me. Well, I haven’t ever told anyone about this,” Karn’s voice trembled as the blood drained from his hands, leaving him cold as winter rain. With so many lives on the line, he couldn’t afford to keep information to himself any longer. While Dodger and the others struggled to scrape together any information that they could, any cards Karn had been keeping close to his chest became unbearably heavy. “There’s something about me you don’t know...”

“Relax, I already know,” Dodger shrugged with a cool, distant attitude. He rolled his window down and set his arm on the door frame. The rushing sound of the air drowned out the warm hum of the radio.

“Wha-... What?” Karn just about choked. Steam rose from his collar as his face flushed a nervous, terrified shade of red. “You... know already?”

“Yep. Figured it out a long time ago. I think most of the guys at the bar already know too,” Dodger shrugged, keeping his voice low and calm as he kept his eyes on the road, searching for the turn-off that led to Nickelas’ house.

“But... how? Uhh...” Karn lost control of his arms and hands. He held his breath as some unseen force of horror

punctured his chest, draining him of his blood. He squirmed in his seat, desperate to just escape the vehicle and hide.

“Doesn’t really matter, does it? It’s no big deal, anyway. Just don’t worry about it,” Dodger said in his most reassuring voice as he reached over with lightly patted Karn on the shoulder. Dodger could feel Karn trembling with some sense of horrified shame. Still, he kept his eyes on the road, not wanting to make his friend feel more cornered than he already was.

“So you know about how my brother and mom died,” Karn sighed, letting out a breath he had been holding in for nearly his entire life.

“Huh? What? I... thought you were gonna tell me-,” Dodger started in confusion, but Tira’s voice cut him off before he could finish.

“Dodger! Turn here!” Tira leaned forward, butting in between Dodger and Karn, pointing to the right of the road. With a startling jerk and a whipping of the steering wheel, the truck turned a hard right onto Majestic Road. Dodger turned to make electric, uncomfortable eye contact with Karn.

“Wait, so you weren’t talking about-,” Dodger stuttered, feeling the oxygen be sucked violently out of his lungs by the vacuum of outer space.

“That... blizzard back in the 60s. When my brother and mom... wait. What did you think I was talking about?” Karn squinted hard, trying to see past Dodger’s sudden stony look. Dodger fell silent as he gulped hard.

“Oh God. Oh my God. This is so awkward. Someone just kill me now, pleeeaaaase,” Tira groaned as she repeatedly slammed her head against her headrest.

“No, yeah, that’s... Yeah, that’s what I thought you were talking about,” Dodger gritted his teeth, desperate to hide his embarrassment at misunderstanding what Karn was talking about. “We all know what happened. Your mom and your brother... they got caught in the blizzard while out driving. They froze to death, like so many other people did back then. It was a terrible way to lose someone...”

“Well, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. They didn’t freeze to death. I went out to look for them. I found their bodies outside the car. Some... animal or something killed them. They were torn up real bad,” Karn sighed, staring into the distance out his window, far beyond the trees and the rolling hills and mountains.

“So what are you saying? Did you see the animal that killed them?” Dodger took a deep breath, slowly regaining the feeling in his hands, despite him tightly clutching the steering wheel like some kind of lifeline.

“Dodger, you know the night back in the 90s when we went out to hunt down Eli Goodwin? What do you remember from that night?” Karn leaned in close, making direct eye contact as Dodger impulsively stepped hard on the gas pedal. The engine moaned with complaint as Dodger leaned back uncomfortably. Dodger looked down at his hand which had been scarred by some animal attack so many years ago.

“Hey, Dodger, turn on the driveway here. There’s Nickelas’ house,” Tira pointed out the window to the right.

At the far end of driveway, barely within site was a two story log cabin style structure, with a seemingly hand built extension with large windows. Tin signs and sculptures of UFOs adorned the front yard, accented with wind chimes, tin cans on strings, security cameras, and flood lights.

A cloud of dust kicked up as a vehicle sped down the driveway, away from the house and toward Dodger's truck. Dodger quickly stuck his hand out the window and flagged down the driver. As the vehicle came to a sliding stop, Dodger stepped out of his truck and approached the driver's window of the black SUV. The window lowered, revealing a sleep deprived, rattled Nickelas Dollarbuck.

"Hey, great to see you come by for a visit! Sorry, I wish I could show you my museum but I'm in a rush," Nickelas panted, nearly out of breath. His jacket was buttoned unevenly and his frazzled hair looked like he had just crawled out of bed.

"Where are you off to in such a rush?" Dodger asked, seeing his arm onto Nickelas' door.

"Bjorna didn't show up to work this morning," Nickelas said, unable to hide the worry in his voice. "She didn't even call in sick or anything. I gotta run down to the diner and cover her shift."