

Silver Falls

# Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

Jerrel Dulay

## Chapter VI

After a 45 minute drive, the headlights of Dodger's truck pushed through a thick, silver fog as his truck wearily eased into a familiar set of ruts in the ground, coming to a stop in its regular parking spot in front of The Dusty Cactus bar. As Dodger flicked the car keys away from the ignition with a heavy sigh, the sound of the engine faded. The distant sound of laughter from deep within the old western bar brought Dodger out of his daze. When Karn opened his passenger side door, the familiar scent of freshly cooked bread and a searing moose steak flooded into the truck. Dodger dragged himself through the swinging doors into the warmth of the dusty building, following the sound of Karn's footsteps.

"Jeez, fellas. What happened to you? You look like shit," Clementine greeted Karn and Dodger as they walked over to their regular seats at the bar. Dodger stopped himself just in time to avoid bumping into someone who was already sitting on his stool. As he pulled himself together, he saw a hand-made, brown leather jacket, on the back of which were patches which depicted two angels, six rounds of ammunition, and three words that read, "Keep Yourself Alive." As Dodger stumbled his way forward, those words metaphorically and physically slapped him in the face.

Dodger was shocked that someone would have taken his regular seat. The figure on the seat turned around to face Dodger, revealing himself to be a young man with short blond hair that shimmered under the dim neon lights and endlessly

deep blue eyes which looked years older than they should have. On the young man's face was a stoic, heavy expression which Dodger swore was familiar somehow.

"Holt! What are ya doin' here?" Karn leaped over Dodger and wrapped his arms around the young man. The serious look on Holt's face faded into the kind of smile a child wears when greeting a favorite uncle. Holt stepped off the seat and put an arm up to lightly pat Karn on the back.

"Good to see you, Karn," Holt smiled casually.

"Hey, Dodger! You know Holt, right? He's Hogan's grandson. He's such a good kid," Karn spun around excitedly, wearing a grin that stretched from ear to ear.

"No. I've only ever heard stories of him. I'm Dodger. Nice to meet you, Holt," Dodger nodded. He thought he recognized that stoic look before. It was the same one his old friend and former co-worker, Hogan, used to wear when lost in thought.

"Nice to meet you," Holt nodded back while shaking Dodger's hand with a firm, assured grip.

"Clementine! If you don't mind, three Hurrican Lights over here please, baby," Karn hopped up onto his seat, waving his hand in the air.

"No thanks for me. I'm having a soda," Holt interjected quickly.

"Hey, come on. You're old enough to drink," Dodger said before realizing he might have made Holt feel cornered. Dodger had seen countless young men become aggressive and

lash out when asked if they were old enough to drink, as if to prove they were worthy of sitting at the grown-ups' table. Instead, Holt only superficially reacted.

"It's just not my style. I've got work to do a bit later anyway," Holt shrugged, very clearly having nothing to prove.

"Alright, two Hurricane Lights and a Moose Juice for my fellas. Is that all, sugar?" Clementine winked at Holt, who, under the cover of the conversation, subtly grabbed a folded piece of paper that Clementine had set down on the counter. Holt slid the paper towards himself and slipped it into his jacket pocket without looking, but as quietly as he did this, Dodger noticed.

"Hey, random question, Holt. You wouldn't happen to know Bull Brandish, would ya?" Dodger picked up a Honey Thunder cup coaster and tapped it on the bar surface to try to appear only vaguely interested in the topic.

"Bull? Uh, well... I've met him and talked to him a couple weeks ago but I don't really know him. Why do you ask?" Holt turned his head to look out the window, past the parking lot, past the trees, and far past the mountains surrounding the bar. Clementine returned and set down Holt's Moose Juice and the beer for Karn and Dodger.

"Have you ever heard of any weird stories around Bull's property? You know, weird animals. How some folks said they seen funny lights in the sky?" Dodger picked up his drink and held it to his face, feeling something wasn't right. He peered from the corner of his eye to see Holt's reaction.

“Hey, Dodger! Did you know Holt’s a composer? He went to college in Leaden City. He’s real good on the guitar and piano. He can play any Midnight Falcons song you can name! And that deer antler coat rack hanging on the wall there. Holt made that when he was just a teenager!” Karn leaned over and extended his glass out. Dodger clinked his glass with Karn’s, then with Holt’s.

“Huh. Now ain’t that somethin’. Cheers,” Dodger said, suddenly derailed. The shot of Honey Thunder he had at Pullen’s Station started to have an effect as Dodger lost his train of thought. “What’s work like doing composing?”

“It’s tough. There’s a lot of competition to deal with,” Holt answered, glancing back at Karn from the corner of his eye. After taking a swig of his drink, Dodger, regained focus.

“So, hey, have you ever been around Bull’s property before?” Dodger asked casually, his eyes locked on the pocket of Holt’s jacket that held the folded paper. As the ringing bell of the pinball machine chimed off from the corner of the room, the haunting sound of two distorted guitars slightly out of tune with each other echoed out of the jukebox speaker. As an unsettling electric keyboard track carried in the deep sound of Bran Steelhide’s vocals, Karn held his glass up and smiled.

“Oooh! I love this song! The Other Me, from *Wander On Home* by The Midnight Falcons, 1976. Who put this song on the jukebox?” Karn called out loudly while tapping his fingers onto a cup coaster as if playing the piano. For a moment, there was a tangible tension as Holt leaned back with a tightly clenched jaw.

“What did you say?” Holt muttered, his brow furrowed tightly.

“I was asked who put the song on. It’s one of my favorites,” Karn answered, tilting his head up and closing his eyes.

“No, not that. You said 1976. Sorry to say you got it wrong. The Midnight Falcons recorded their last album in 1974, while they were fighting the Vietnam War,” Holt set his arm on the table and turned toward Karn, giving him a look of concern. It was rare for Karn to get a song wrong.

“Sorry, baby, but I know my stuff! The Other Me was written and recorded in 1976. Bran Steelhide and I were having a smoke together when he started writing it,” Karn humbly bragged as he took a generous gulp of his drink.

“N... No. You got the years wrong. Bran Steelhide died of a gunshot wound in 1974 while he was in Vietnam. There’s only six albums, with Bound For The Skyline recorded just before Bran’s death,” Holt argued, his voice becoming deep and sharp.

“Whoa, baby! You sure you haven’t had a drink tonight already? Bran Steelhide didn’t die. He lived at my house for almost a year after he got back from the war. The Midnight Falcons have ten albums, with their last one, Heavy Shadow, done in 1981,” Karn sang out, smiling and shaking his fists to match the beat of drums.

“Wh... what?” Holt whispered. The color had drained entirely from his face as his eyes went blank. In an instant, he seemed to have aged ten years.

“You alright there, partner?” Dodger set his hand on Holt’s shoulder.

“Uh, yeah. I... guess I just remembered it wrong,” Holt’s words barely managed to escape his parched throat. Of course Holt was wrong. Dodger knew all ten albums and was as big a fan of The Midnight Falcons as anyone else. Surely, Holt had to have been thinking of a totally different band. For the briefest of moments, Dodger’s and Holt’s eyes met, and Dodger caught the fleeting glimpse of a pained horror.

As Dodger heard the swinging door behind him creak, Clementine tapped the counter to grab Holt’s attention before she pointed to the front door with her eyes. Holt and Dodger turned to see a young woman with blazing red hair balanced by a pair of gentle, reassuring green eyes. Her sleeveless, floral pattern, yellow summer shirt told a story of a woman who was far tougher than she looked, as everyone else was wearing a jacket to stay warm in the biting autumn air. No, that wasn’t just any random woman. It was Analise Henceforth, the event organizer who managed the Moose Steak Festival two weeks ago and even personally ensured Dodger got the stall location he requested.

“Gotta go,” Holt mumbled, drowsy eyed, as he nearly fell off his seat. He walked over to the young lady who was visibly concerned to see Holt’s expression. They left through the front door as just Holt reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out the small folded paper.

Dodger removed his baseball cap and slicked his hair back, wondering what that weird conversation could have been about. He stared intently at his Honey Thunder cup

coaster. Clementine paced her way over to Dodger and tried to give him a smile but he was just too distracted to pay attention.

“You haven’t been the same since Samba died,” she said gently, lightly resting her hand onto Dodger’s fist.

“That’s what happens when dogs get old,” Dodger sighed. He set his open palm down onto the cup coaster.

“The way you’re staring at that Honey Thunder, you’re not thinking of having another wild night like last night, are ya?” Clementine joked, finally able to make eye contact with him.

“No, probably not. Hey, we were just up at Pullen’s Station. They did a shot of Honey Thunder and did the darndest thing. The bartender hit this big red button, there were flashing lights and sound effects of a thunder storm. It was pretty weird,” Dodger said, finishing his drink, processing his defeat at the hands of Iron.

“Oh, that. Hahaha, the Honey Thunder Company offers you like five hundred bucks a month if you install that stupid light show and turn it on whenever someone buys a round for everyone,” Clementine said, adjusting her cap, knowing full well from Dodger’s tone that he had something he wanted to get off his chest.

“That’s free money. Why don’t you do it here?” Dodger asked, tapping his glass down to signal a refill for both Karn and himself.

“All them flashing lights. You know a couple of our regulars been to war. What with Slim’s PTSD. And Stormy



doesn't do well with flashing lights either. It's just 500 bucks. Who cares?" Clementine shrugged as she poured two new drinks out and set them down in front of Dodger and Karn. Just as she did so, a large man with ever shifting eyes and a gut that extended out beyond his ego leaned in and set his meaty forearms down onto the counter.

"Hey, I left my wallet at home, could you spot me a drink?" an overweight sounding voice asked, chewing gum loudly while letting out intermittent smacking sounds.

"Steel, that's rude. I told you to stop doing that to folks," Clementine gave the heavy set gentleman a piercing glare.

"What? Oh, hey, we're all friends here! That's alright, Clementine. Get a drink for my friend here, uhh... what's your name?" Karn returned to the world just as the song on the jukebox ended.

"Steel. Steel Hart. But you've probably already heard of me. I've lived here my whole life," the rotund man said, pushing his weight in between Karn and Dodger.

"Yeah, baby! Me too! That's okay, Clementine. I'll get him a drink," Karn laughed. Clementine rolled her eyes loud enough for Steel to hear as she poured him a beer.

"Don't you remember me? I had a couple shots with you two old dudes last night with that Wirriam guy," Steel said, sounding hurt that Karn didn't remember him. "I was here the whole time. You were doing that funny little dance."

"Yeah, maybe I remember that. Maybe not. Who knows?" Karn gave a goofy, squinty-eyed grin as Dodger tried

to determine if Karn was pretending to not remember this guy just to piss him off. “Oh, Clementine. Can we please get a bag of pretzels over here?”

“Now wait a cotton pickin’ minute, Karn. Where’s my food basket? You better not have lost another one!” Clementine shouted, winding up a hand towel as if she were about to use it as a whip.

“Oh, no! Don’t get mad at me! I’ve got it! It’s in Dodger’s truck! I’ll go grab it!” Karn went wide eyed, facing the threat of Clementine’s divine punishment. He leaped off his barstool and just about sprinted outside, leaving the swinging doors billowing behind him.

“Man, what a weird little old dude,” Steel said, nudging Dodger with his elbow.

“Heh,” Dodger grunted, staring down into his drink.

“Too bad it’s quiet here tonight. Doesn’t look like there’ll be another party like last night,” Steel took a big swig of his drink.

“Heh,” Dodger grunted, staring down into his drink.

“Geez man. What’s got your panties in a twist?” Steel asked with frustration as he kicked the base of Dodger’s bar stool. Dodger didn’t respond at all.

“You gotta lighten up, gramps. Hey, I know. You wanna see something funny? Watch this, this is gonna be hilarious!” Steel chimed out, loudly snapping the chewing gum in his mouth, snagging Dodger’s attention. Steel reached deep into his cavernous maw and pulled out a grotesque lump of

chewing gum. Clementine was called to the other end of the bar as a tall, thin man flagged her down.

Steel stepped off his bar stool with his drink in hand. He grabbed Karn's drink and slid it over next to Dodger. Then, with the rascally look of a child, Steel planted his gum directly on the center of Karn's barstool. Steel chuckled, congratulating himself. Dodger still didn't react.

Karn came dashing through the front door, arms outstretched with the food basket in hand. "See? I've got it! I didn't lose it! I brought it right back!"

"Here, buddy. Have it seat right here," Steel snickered with a terrible grin. He grabbed Karn roughly by the shoulder and about just about picked him up, ready to drop him on the seat. All the while, Karn wore his usually happy-go-lucky smile. It was then Dodger understood what was happening.

With only a split second to react, Dodger moved his glass out of the way and picked up his cup coaster. With an effortless flick of his wrist, he launched the cardboard projectile like a throwing knife. He couldn't afford to miss. He had to protect his friend. In less than a blink of an eye, Dodger's throw had found its mark, landing dead center on top of the chewing gum that had been planted on Karn's seat. With only a fraction of a second to spare, Karn landed on the seat, totally unaware of what had just happened.

Steel looked back at Dodger with a toothy grin, then down at Karn's seat, then back to Dodger, expecting uproarious laughter. Dodger maintained his stony gaze, frustrating Steel to no end. Steel could not contain his glee as he openly bellowed like an animal.

“Hey, gramps! Hop off your seat! I think you sat on something!” Steel laughed, slapping Karn hard on the back. Confused, Karn hopped off his seat, only to see a Honey Thunder cup coaster sitting perfectly square on the stool.

“I sat on this coaster? Is it really that funny?” Karn asked, scratching his beard. Steel stared at the seat in disbelief, utterly flabbergasted, unable to understand how his prank could have failed. Steel’s laughter faded into a self conceited chuckle as he picked up his drink and wandered off into a different part of the bar.

Karn and Dodger sat side by side, quietly sipping at their drinks, letting time pass by them. People came into the bar, and people left. Songs on the jukebox played and ended. For a while, they quietly watched a re-run of *The Midnight Realm*, a black and white sci-fi show from the 60’s, on the bar TV. At some point, the bright eyed lady with rocket ship earrings tapped Dodger on the shoulder and said something, but Dodger was so lost in thought, he barely heard what she said as she walked away. The tall, thin man sat down next to them for a while, rambling about Bigfoot or something before he pulled out an unopened pack of cigarettes. He fumbled, unable to remove the plastic from the box until he asked Dodger for help. Dodger reached for his belt, feeling the three throwing knives he always carried with him. Without thinking or looking, in a single smooth motion, he grabbed one of the knives and swung his hand out, slicing the plastic of the tall, thin man’s cigarette box clean in half. Clementine refilled their drinks, switching to from Hurricane Light to Pale Moonlight when she realized the men intended to just sit and exist for a while. Karn eventually folded up the cup coaster on the seat,

cleaning up the gum that handed been planted there as a prank.

“You sure took it easy on that kid,” Karn muttered.

“Kids will be kids. It was just a harmless prank,” Dodger sipped his drink, tasting the difference in stronger beer.

“Chewing gum, though? That’s a bit childish,” Karn leaned down to rest his chin on his folded hands.

“We all grow up at our own pace,” Dodger shrugged.

“Thanks for the save, anyway,” Karn bumped his shoulder into Dodger, who bumped him back in return. “Why are you asking around about Bull and those lights in the sky? Bull’s just a weird guy and those lights are only aircraft.”

“I don’t know. It’s just suspicious, I guess,” Dodger turned to Karn in the eyes. Despite the long day they had spent connecting with each other outside of the bar, this moment of blurry brotherhood was familiar and comforting.

“You don’t believe in aliens and UFOs and all that crazy nonsense, do you?” Karn chuckled.

“No, of course not. That stuff is all just make believe,” Dodger answered, almost choking on his words.

“Then why are you getting so worked up about it all?” Karn took a big gulp of his drink.

“I don’t know. Have you ever had a thought in the back of your mind that you couldn’t make go away? Somehow, you know thinking that thought is wrong, but you still wish there was some way to make you feel like it’s okay to think that?”

Dodger's voice poured out of his loose jaw, well oiled after a couple drinks.

Karn stared deep into his drink in silence, gazing longingly into an ever expanding void.

"You feel something you can't explain? And you'd do anything, absolutely anything to just get your hands on it, to just get a grip, you know? In your mind, you start weighing up what you'd be willing to trade in exchange for being able to understand what's going on in your own mind," Dodger's voice wavered with raw vulnerability. Gone was his bullet proof armor. Karn had never heard him talk like that before in all the years they knew each other.

Karn disappeared farther into the swirling haze of his drink. A tear formed in the corner of his eye as he sniffled and wiped his nose on a handkerchief. He wasn't sure what to say to Dodger. How could he say out loud something he had never said out loud before in his whole life?

"I guess I got no idea what that's like," Karn's voice cracked as his eyes struggled to fight back a torrent of pain that had been swelling up for decades. He carefully stepped down off the bar stool before saying, "Gotta take a leak. Be back in a minute." He slowly stepped away, disappearing somewhere behind the sound of the crackling fireplace. Dodger sat alone in silence. Whether or not anyone else was sitting in the bar with him, he couldn't tell, and he didn't really care.