

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

Jerrel Dulay

Chapter VII

Dodger wasn't sure how long it was before he felt a rough poke against his shoulder. He turned around to see a familiar face with light blue eyes that always seemed to be looking for some kind of challenge and a beard that was too well groomed for the rugged face it was attached too. The graying blonde hair, nametag that read "Rauno", and dark blue jumpsuit were unmistakable. Duct tape over the jumpsuit's left pocket glinted dimly in the sighing light from above.

"Hey, Dodger, you busy?" Rauno Tähtinen hunched over timidly as he whispered. Dodger could identify that distinct Finnish accent anywhere but he almost didn't recognize the figure who usually held his chest out proudly with the confidence of a man who had already seen the worst there was to see in the world and had made it through the other side, battered but not beaten.

"Rauno, partner! Good to see ya. Sit here! Have a drink," Dodger nodded, wobbling unsteadily as he patted the bar stool to his right.

"I... uh... okay," Rauno said, his hands trembling as he steadied himself and climbed up onto the bar stool next to Dodger. He waved to Clementine who then brought him his regular Pale Moonlight.

"What brings you around? You workin'?" Dodger asked, clinking his glass against Rauno's.

“I finished work last week,” Rauno answered slowly, clutching a small notebook tightly in his hand. He looked down, working up the courage to open the thing that clearly had the entirety of his attention.

“Huh. Why haven’t you gone back home to Diamond Island?” Dodger asked, looking at Rauno, feeling his head spin a bit. He had lost track of how many drinks he and Karn shared.

“Do you remember when we worked at Silver Lining motel a couple weeks ago?” Rauno squinted hard. He poured the entirety of his beer down his throat before signaling Clementine for another.

“Yeah, sure, why?” Dodger answered, swallowing his drink hard, noticing Rauno’s disheveled hair and deep, dark circles under his eyes, signifying a total lack of sleep and peace of mind.

“There was a room there that was a total mess. Looked like a warzone. The guy had papers from a journal scattered all over. I read some of them. It said something about the old steel mill, so I went to the steel mill to look. I... uh, I saw something there,” Rauno finished his second drink, struggling to calm his nerves. His beer slopped down the side of his beard as if trying to run away from the words that were about to come out.

“What did you see? Was it lights in the sky?” Dodger’s eyes widened, ready for Rauno to get to the point.

“No. I copied this journal page I found in the room. You read it yourself and tell me what you think,” Rauno said. As his

voice shook, some of his English words disappeared, replaced by Finnish words that he couldn't stop from coming out. Rauno's still quivering hands pried open his notebook, flipping past pages with numbers and lines drawn with the accuracy of a most discerning draftsman, indicating measurements used for electrical work. After finding a page with hastily scribbled text, Rauno handed the notebook to Dodger, who squinted hard to focus his eyes in the dusk-like atmosphere of the bar.

The paper read, "I saw something! I climbed over the wire fence by the abandoned steel mill! It was from a distance. It was a weird. I don't know. It gave me nightmares. It was like some kind of animal, but it had way too many legs. And its face. Dear god. It looked like it stole a man's face. I need guns. I need weapons. There's something weird going on here."

Dodger's heart slammed against his rib cage as if trying to escape from his chest. He swallowed a gulp of his drink, almost choking. Rauno quickly snatched the notebook, folded it up, and tucked it back into his pocket.

"Well? What do you think of that?" Rauno asked under his breath. He waved at Clementine and put up two fingers with a twisting motion. After a moment, she returned with two shot glasses, one with Silver Courage for Dodger and Grandpa's Juice for Rauno.

"That's definitely weird. Maybe it was a baby deer. You know they look gross when they're just born," Dodger took a deep breath as they lightly bumped their glasses together before drinking the shot. With renewed fire in his stomach, Rauno roared out, taking a gasp of air.

“Ahhh, that’s bullshit. What was the thing you said about Samba three weeks ago?” Rauno set his shot glass down with a slam. Clementine looked to Rauno from the other end of the bar, holding up to fingers. Rauno nodded.

“What? What do you mean?” Dodger set his shot glass down gently without a sound.

“When you found Samba dead. What did you say about it?” Rauno’s voice became tough and confident.

“Samba? He... he was old. He died of old age. I found him curled up on his bed. He had his face turned toward me. He fell asleep watching me like he always did,” Dodger shrank into his shot glass, his words becoming smaller and smaller as he spoke.

“That’s not what you told me earlier this month,” Rauno argued, genuinely confused as to why Dodger was saying that.

“What? Yes it is. He died peacefully in his sleep right next to me,” Dodger pleaded, begging his friend to agree. He reached up and removed his cap while slicking his hair back, only to slip and drop the cap to the floor with the shocking sound of thunder. An icy wind shot through his body. Somehow, he knew what Rauno was going to say next.

“No, that’s not what you said. You said he went crazy barking at the front door late at night so you let him out. You said you saw him run north along the road so you got in your truck to look for him,” Rauno recounted, squinting hard to recall the details. “You said you followed his barking and you went through a hole in the fence on the Brandish property.

You found him bloodied and torn apart. You said you saw a weird creature there and it had an almost human face. You said-

“Stop it!” Dodger roared at the top of his lungs, slamming his fist down against the bar’s surface, rumbling the entire building as if an earthquake had just struck. The glass bottles standing all along the back wall behind the bar rattled as if a gunshot had just been fired. Dodger’s face contorted into a tangle of excruciating horror as his voice echoed out into the night. Even the wind froze in place to obey. All seven other people in the bar stared in awe at Dodger. In all the years the locals there had known Dodger, they had never heard him raise his voice. He had never lost his cool, never argued, and certainly never yelled at a friend. The pinball machine, the TV playing an old sci-fi show from the 60’s, and the jukebox all fell silent, cowering in fear. For that moment, Dodger was overcome with a ringing in his ears, sounding like the voices of a choir calling out from somewhere in the distance.

Rauno looked down, unsure of what to say. Why would Dodger react like that? Why was Dodger denying what he said just a few weeks ago? Clementine walked over to Rauno without making a sound, giving him a worried look, setting down two more shots.

“Two Lumberjack Grease, double,” Rauno ordered, his voice course and dry. He could see Dodger clenching his teeth, trying hard to stop himself from saying anything else. In the more than 15 years they had known each other, Dodger was always the one to keep calm and stand by as other people

lashed out at the unfair world around them. What was he supposed to say to Dodger now? How was he supposed help?

“Sorry,” Dodger whimpered, barely making a sound. His hands stung from hitting the bar surface so hard. He trembled as he picked up his shotglass, the remainder of which had spilled onto the bar.

“When I lived in Finland, one piece of advice my father used to say to me was *‘Ei kysyvä tieltä eksy.’* It’s almost like saying, ‘He who asks for the road doesn’t get lost.’ I thought it was a funny sort of saying. Maybe he was trying to say there’s nothing wrong with asking for help sometimes,” Rauno spoke softly, gazing into the mirror on the back wall of the bar. For a brief moment he thought he was looking at his father’s face and hearing his father’s voice. A subtle, rare smile escaped from behind his beard.

“You’re right. I just- Samba was the best dog I’ve ever had. He was special. I got no idea why he would have run all the way to the Brandish property like that. And then some animal-,” Dodger’s words snagged on the inside of his throat.

Clementine mixed two drinks softly, careful to avoid disturbing Dodger with any loud noises. She gently set the drinks down in front of Dodger and Rauno, and with a delicate smile, said, “This one’s on me.” Without making eye contact, the two men clinked their glasses together and washed down their shots with another drink.

“So what did you see at the old abandoned steel mill?” Dodger turned to face Rauno.

“The paper said there was a weird creature. When I was young, I used to believe there were Hiisi in the forest in Finland. What’s the word? Eh... goblins. My father told me there’s no such thing as monsters. So I went out into the forest alone and I looked. No monsters. When I read this guy’s journal, I went to the steel mill to see for myself and prove there’s no such thing as a monster. The padlock on the gate was unlocked. One of the abandoned buildings was even unlocked so I went inside. I saw something. It was dark. Didn’t get a good look at it. But it wasn’t any animal I ever saw before. It was like the guy said. It had too many legs and it had a face like... I don’t know the word in English. I ran away,” Rauno exhaled deeply then drank down half of his drink. Dodger understood then that Rauno really needed to tell someone; to say it out loud and just get things off his chest. He needed to get a grip on something he just couldn’t understand on his own. Dodger wondered if he would ever have the guts to do the same.

With an unexpected creaking of the swinging doors, a familiar figure appeared and stepped confidentially toward the bar. The figure took the seat nearest to the front door before his eyes glistened in the neon lights hanging from above. Dodger looked over and couldn’t believe what he saw. It was Sheriff Moss, not wearing his work uniform, just sitting at the bar. Outside of disco dance night at the bar, Dodger had never really seen Moss come to the bar just to sit. Dodger watched intensely to see what would happen. Rauno soon noticed Dodger had become distracted.

“Whoa, that’s weird!” a high pitched voice suddenly appeared next to Dodger, jolting him to attention.

“Hey, whoa! Tira! You surprised me there,” Dodger said with a jump. The bright eyed lady in her late 20’s with rocket ship earrings plopped herself onto the seat next to Dodger.

“That’s unusual to see Moss here, isn’t it?” Tira Dollarbuck leaned forward on the bar with both her elbows while sipping on a strawberry smoothie. She kicked her legs out playfully, swinging on her seat.

“Who’s this, Dodger? A girlfriend?” Rauno leaned in and whispered to Dodger, nudging Dodger’s arm.

“Blegh!” both Dodger and Tira groaned, twisting their faces in disgust. Rauno went wide eyed, unable to understand the reaction. He didn’t think Dodger was bad looking and Tira was clearly a very attractive lady.

“This is Tira. She used to babysit my daughter, Dahlia. Now she’s all grown up and works for S.A.S.S. believe it or not. Tira, this is Rauno, a good friend of mine. He works at Flatwoods Electrical with me,” Dodger explained with pride as if he were talking about his own daughter.

“Nice to meet you, Rauno,” Tira leaned across Dodger and gave Rauno a firm, confident handshake. Rauno nodded in return and gave a subtle, shy smile.

“Anyway, Dodger, I got really close to beating your high score on the pinball machine but I just can’t get there.” Tira leaned onto the bar, setting her face on her palm.

“Huh? Oh, that’s not my high score on the machine. That’s Rauno’s,” Dodger shrugged, pointing to his friend.

“What? Seriously? I just thought... oh... How do you get a score like that? Care to share some tips on how you did it?” Tira covered her mouth in surprise.

“Nothing special. You just watch the movement of the balls. You have to feel the balls in your hand,” Rauno said, slightly slurring his speech with a thickening Finnish accent as his drinks suddenly hit him hard. Tira’s eyes went wide as her face flushed bright red. It took all the strength she had to stop herself from bursting into laughter. Rauno looked ahead expressionless, absolutely oblivious to what he had just said.

“Lost in translation,” Dodger muttered as he applied his palm to his face with an audible slap. He felt the floorboards sag as the front door creaked open again. An evening wind blew into the bar, bringing with it wisps of fog as another familiar figure cautiously entered. Bull Brandish made his way toward the bar and sat down next to Moss the way a fully loaded cement pourer drops its legs to stabilize itself. Clementine walked to the two men sitting at the far end of the bar while watching the rest of the room from the corner of her eye.

“Hot diggity damn! Can you believe that? Bull Brandish? Here?” a scraggly, slurring voice creaked out. A red eyed, wobbly, tall, thin man dropped himself down onto the seat to the left of Tira. The tall, thin man wore a tattered, white, Falcon Fang shirt that had obviously been through a washing machine with red clothes. Scrambled long hair and a defiantly tired face told a story of a man in his late 50’s who was more concerned with partying than anything else.

“Shh! Keep your voice down, Slim! He might hear you,” Tira whispered.

“That’s twice tonight he’s come on in here! Maybe he’s lonely and needs a friend. I’m gonna go on over there and buy him a drink,” Slim Roberts said while slurping his Pale Moonlight, spilling some of it onto his shirt.

“Hold it. He’s busy,” Dodger grunted, extending his hand out to push Slim back onto his seat.

“Hey, where’s your buddy, Bear? It’s weird seeing you settin’ here without him,” Slim gave Dodger a confused look.

“I don’t know,” Dodger sighed, wondering if he should even mention the falling out between him and Bear, all because Dodger had a short talk with Arnalt Weiss. Turning away from Slim, Dodger watched Clementine quietly discuss something with Moss and Dodger. She pointed to something on a large piece of paper, prompting Bull to shake his head in disagreement. Dodger, Rauno, Tira, and Slim each watched while holding their breath, trying to guess what it was Moss and Bull could have been discussing. Bull set a box of something on the counter with a tinny, metallic clattering, and pointed to Clementine, then the doorway to the back room.

“What do you think that is?” Tira gasped.

“Sounded like a box of ammo,” Dodger answered, refusing to take his eyes off of Bull.

Bull pointed toward the front door and waved his arm subtly. Clementine nodded, glancing back to notice the group at the far end of the bar watching them intently.

“Bull gave her some folded bits of paper earlier. She’s handed those papers out to a couple people so far tonight,” Dodger scratched his chin, feeling the stubble on his face threatening to grow into a full beard if he didn’t soon take action.

“What’s on the paper? A party invitation?” Tira looked up to the ceiling, imagining what Bull could possibly want from the people in the bar.

“No clue, but Clementine pretended they didn’t exist when I asked her about them,” Dodger explained.

“Oh no, a party that I’m not invited to,” Slim whined, crumpling down onto the counter.

Moss put both his arms up, extending his hands, as if to explain the size of something to Bull. Clementine turned her back to the others in the bar to hide her body language.

“Whoa, what does that mean!?” Tira gasped.

“He’s measuring cutting a tree for timber,” Rauno spouted out plainly.

“No, he’s explaining ideal tickle techniques,” Slim countered, his tone as serious as the night is dark. Dodger turned to stare Slim directly in the eyes, squinting as if to say, “Are you serious?”

Bull stood up, pointed his index finger forward, then with a sharp, punching movement, twisted his hand and jabbed his finger upward. The four figures huddled together at the bar flinched in horrified unison.

“A knife killing technique!” Tira gasped with her hand covering her mouth.

“Stuffing a turkey,” Rauno casually took a sip from his drink, rattling the ice cubes.

“Prostate exam!” Slim exclaimed with wide eyes and a look of horror, patting his rear end as if in pain.

Clementine picked up the box of ammunition and kept her eyes locked to the ground as she walked through the dark doorway into the back room. Moss stood up and nodded with a grave look as Bull opened his mouth wide and pointed to the back of his throat.

“What the hell?” Dodger couldn’t stop himself from gasping.

“Secret ninja strangling technique,” Tira curled up as she recoiled in fear.

“Suicide pact,” Rauno tipped his glass back, rattling the ice cubes and finding the bottom of his drink.

“French kissing stories with a forbidden love,” Slim grinned with jealous glee as he stroked his bushy mustache. Dodger, Rauno, and Tira each turned to Slim, giving him a dull, frustrated glare.

“What the hell, Slim?” Dodger shook his head.

“What!? Hey, I’m just as straight as the next guy, but if a guy as big as Bull told you he was a fixin’ to kiss ya, well there ain’t much you can do you stop him,” Slim reasoned, absolutely certain of his logic.

“Godamnit, Slim,” Dodger removed his glasses and applied his palm to his face with an audible slap.

A slight breeze could be heard as the front door inched open warily. Peering in through the doorway was a man in his mid 40’s with an athletic build, long brown hair combed back neatly, and a faraway look on his face as he seemed to be ever searching the horizon for something just beyond his grasp. Wearing a dark green and brown, long sleeve plaid shirt and leather gloves he had made himself, he signaled to Moss.

“Uncle Wood!” Tira covered her mouth to stifle her words at the last second. After a handshake and a nod, Moss and Bull joined the man who had appeared at the front door and left the bar, leaving a pile of questions behind where they had been standing just moments prior. The disjointed sound of the night wind moaned as the swinging front door creaked to a stand-still.

“Now what was that all about?” Dodger asked himself. That evening’s drinks had lubricated his jaw enough that words were coming out before he could filter them.

“You know Hogan’s friend, Arnalt Weiss, was in here earlier. He was with the guy who runs Sam’s gas station. Clementine handed them those little pieces of paper and then they left,” Tira recounted, sipping through her straw the last bit of her strawberry smoothie.

“Tira, when you said ‘Uncle Wood’ just now, did you mean Wood Wheeler, the owner of Allagash Lumber?” Dodger questioned, breathing freely since Bull had left the bar.

“Well, yeah, that’s him. But what was he doing with Bull? Uncle Wood doesn’t even know Bull,” Tira frowned, trying to piece together her fragmented information into a picture that made sense.

“So that makes Hogan’s grandson, Sheriff Moss, Analise Henceforth, Wood Wheeler, Arnalt Weiss, and the fella from the gas station. What in blue blazes could they be doing with Bull Brandish?” Dodger gazed far into the mirror on the back wall as if peering deep past time and space.

“Uncle Wood is involved. It has to be something that makes sense. Maybe they’re building something on Bull’s property,” Tira reasoned, swirling the straw in circles within her empty glass.

“Suicide cult,” Rauno said plainly, spitting an ice cube back into his empty glass.

“Sex cult, definitely,” Slim stated, slurping the last of the drink from his glass like a dog drinking water from a bowl.

“No! Don’t say that about Uncle Wood! It must be something innocuous, like a late night book club,” Tira pleaded.

“Human sacrifice. Forest spirit summoning ritual,” Rauno shrugged, looking around the room for Clementine.

“Cabin in the woods orgy party,” Slim sighed genuinely, disappointed that he had not been invited.

“I don’t know. What do you think about this all, Karn?” Dodger turned around, for the first time realizing that Karn was no longer sitting there with him. “Karn!?” Dodger called

out, his eyes darting from one corner of the room to the other. He jumped off his seat and stumbled unsteadily as he clambered his way across the bar and past the front door. The biting night fog nipped at Dodger's face but he didn't care. He shielded his eyes from the searing pale moonlight to see that Karn's truck was no longer there in the parking lot. In all the years they had been drinking together, Karn had never just left without saying anything like that before.

"Karn!" Dodger shouted, gasping and taking in bites of the ever cooling air. The front door creaked open timidly as Rauno, Tira, and Slim followed Dodger outside.

"What happened?" Rauno asked, steadying himself against a wooden pillar that held up the weathered awning that ran around the front of the bar.

"Karn's gone. He left without saying anything. It's Bull's fault. It has to be," Dodger grunted through gritted teeth, struggling to make sense of the situation.

"How do you know that? Maybe he just went home," Rauno tried to calm Dodger down, but Rauno had taken his drinks too fast and was having trouble finding his footing.

"No, I should have noticed it before. When I was asking Hogan's grandson about Bull's property, for some reason, Karn kept interrupting me. He's been checking his watch all night long. I don't know why, but Karn's tangled up in all this business with Bull and I've had enough of this shit," Dodger felt his blood nearly boil. The others could see steam rising from Dodger's body.

“What are you gonna do?” Rauno asked. A look of worried concern broke through his stoic expression. He had never seen Dodger get so worked up before.

“I’m going to Bull Brandish’s property and I’m gonna find that son of a bitch, and I’m gonna ask him what in the hell this is all about,” Dodger spun around. Rauno recognized the look of betrayal and hurt in Dodger’s eyes, the same look he saw in his own eyes through a mirror when he returned to Finland one day too late to see his father still alive.

“I go with you,” Rauno planted his feet on the ground firmly. Dodger couldn’t understand why Rauno would offer to accompany him, breaking free from his usual ‘do it yourself’ attitude. Rauno’s words from earlier in the evening were still echoing in Dodger’s mind. “There’s nothing wrong with asking for help sometimes.”

“Whoa, you guys have had way too much to drink. You can’t drive all the way over there!” Tira stomped on the ground, putting her foot down.

“Sorry, little lady. You can’t stop me,” Dodger grunted, searching his pockets for his car keys.

“I didn’t say I’d stop you. I need to know what’s going on here, too. We’ve all heard stories of the weird stuff that happens on Bull’s property. I’m worried about Uncle Wood now and I’m not just going to drop it. Let me drive you there and we can all get to the bottom of this together,” within an instant, Tira’s face shifted from a playful former babysitter to a professional business woman with years of experience working in impossibly dangerous environments which demanded the highest degree of accuracy and level headed

decision making. Her logic was sound. There was no way Dodger could argue with her.

“It’s too dangerous. There’s dangerous things on that property! Samba-,” Dodger protested until he saw Rauno shake his head and mutter *“Ei kysyvä tieltä eksy.”*

“Oh, I’m sure you three big strong men can protect a little girl like me. I spend six months at a time working on the S.A.S.S. Space Station. I think I know how to deal with dangerous things,” Tira stated firmly, her voice dropping an octave.

“Oh no! Not no way, not no how! Not me! Not for ol’ Slim. Dangerous things ain’t right for ol’ Slim. You guys got some kind of death wish. I’m staying right here where all the sane people live,” Slim put his hands up in the air and marched back into the safety of the bar.

“Fine, Tira, but you’re staying in the car,” Dodger took a hard look at Tira. He noticed for the first time that she was no longer the starry-eyed teenager with big dreams who used to babysit his daughter. For the first time, he saw the age and wisdom in Tira’s eyes. She was a grown woman who didn’t need to be told what to do.

“We’ll see what happens when we get there,” Tira nodded, knowing full well she wasn’t going to just sit in the car. “Come on, my car is this way.”

Just as they all turned around to walk toward Tira’s sedan, they were stopped in their tracks by a young man whose eyes were as wide as the full moon. His skin was entirely drained of color as he stepped beneath the glow of

the amber street light. His hands trembled as he struggled to keep a grip on his camera.

“Fort, hey, what are you doing here?” Dodger was caught off guard. He had totally forgotten he asked Fort to bring the memory card back to him at the bar.

“D... Dodger, the m... memory card. Your video files,” Fort could barely speak. A twisted expression of terror had wrapped its gnarly fingers tightly around Fort’s throat.

“Oh, the memory card. Was you able to get any of my video files fixed?” Dodger asked, swaying as he focused his vision and steadied himself. “You didn’t watch any of my videos, did you?”

Fort’s breath left his body as he fought his muscles to raise the camera up to chest height. His eyes glazed over in blind panic as he struggled to cough out the words that had become lodged in his throat.

“Oh God. I saw something, Dodger. I saw something in the video.”

