

Silver Falls

Heavy Shadow

Sungrand Studios

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Chapter IX

The road grew long and heavy, with cracks and stones becoming more frequent the farther Tira's car pushed into the darkness. Trees raised up high, looming over the road like greedy hands, strangling the moonlight as it desperately trickled to the ground. Dodger scanned the fence line as they drove, nearly burning a hole through the windows with his eyes. His heart skipped a beat as they drove past the spot where there had been a hole in the fence three weeks ago; the hole that Dodger climbed through to follow Samba. The chain link fence had been replaced with a shiny new material that made it apparent there was a recent repair. Dodger felt a terrible, empty void form somewhere deep inside him as he looked away from the window.

"That's where a deer attacked me. Almost knocked me off my bike," Rauno pointed at the side of the road.

"Wait, what? When?" Dodger turned around to look at out the window.

"Last Sunday. Normally I ride bike with my friend, Danteo, you know, the guy from South Africa. He was busy. I rode alone and this deer chased me more than a mile," Rauno said, looking out the window.

"Why would a deer attack a person?" Tira asked, not fully believing Rauno's story.

“Why would a person attack another person?” Rauno shrugged, causing Tira to flinch as she failed to think of an answer.

“Hey, turn left here, onto the dirt road,” Dodger pointed abruptly.

“What? Why?” Tira adeptly slowed the vehicle and whipped the steering wheel with the elegance and accuracy of the most experienced stunt driver, drifting the vehicle smoothly onto the hidden dirt road.

“You can see tire tracks in the dirt going to and from the road. It’s been a windy night. Those tracks had to have been made recently,” Dodger explained.

“Gotcha,” Tira replied, feeling a sense of reassurance that Dodger still had some wits about him even after all the drinks he had. The car rumbled, bouncing with chaotic rhythm between ruts in the dirt road. In unison, Dodger, Rauno, and Tira removed their seatbelts as the rocking intensified. The dust of the ground kicked up, reflecting off the headlights with a blinding curtain that made it impossible to see more than a few feet in front of the car.

To their left, a rocky embankment rose up about three times the height of the car. To their right, a tangle of trees and bushes reached out as if trying to escape the maw of a hungry darkness. The dirt road curved sharply from side to side, making it nearly impossible to look back and see the road that fell behind them, as well as the road that awaited them ahead.

Dodger searched the ever thickening tangle of trees to the right, looking for any shape that may point out any kind of

gathering of people. Some unseen force stopped him from looking to the left, toward the direction where Dodger had found Samba's bloodied body and... something. Something else he just couldn't remember. The more he tried to recall it, the more his head throbbed with blinding pain. He felt like he was staring at an empty, blank wall in his house, knowing that there was supposed to be a framed photo hanging there.

"So this is what it's like on the Brandish property," Tira gasped in awe, unable to hide a smile on her face. Her eyes sparkled as the forest to the right retreated back, revealing a clearing with a grassy meadow and a large, distinct boulder in the middle. "Whoa... No way. That's where they filmed that."

"What are you talking about?" Dodger peered out the window.

"You know the old show from the 60's, The Midnight Realm? It was written and directed by Bull's grandfather, Bill Brandish. They filmed most of the episodes here. That clearing there must be where they filmed the episode with the rock monsters that hatched out of boulders and tried to turn people into rock monsters!" Tira giggled with excitement.

"Hey. Tira. You didn't offer to drive us here just to look for scenes out of that old TV show, did you?" Dodger gave Tira the kind of look a father would give his daughter when his daughter would come home after staying out too late.

"Whaaat? No! No way. That's crazy. You're talking crazy talk. Why would someone do something like that? It'd be really irresponsible," Tira grinned, unable to stifle her laughter. "Look! Over there to the left! There's a little pond. I bet that's the one where the swamp creature transformed

into a clone of the professor who was conducting experiments on it.”

Dodger couldn't help but look where Tira was pointing. Shellaby, the owner of the gun shop, always talked about The Midnight Realm and even had the ringtone of the phone in the shop set to the theme song of the show. Dodger wondered how impressed and jealous she would be if Dodger casually dropped in conversation that he had seen actual locations where the show was filmed. Then, Dodger heard something that made him feel like vomiting up all the drinks he had throughout the evening.

“There's someone standing there in the forest,” Rauno muttered.

“What!?” Dodger whipped his head around to look. Tira slammed the breaks on the car, bringing the car to a skidding stop. Dust swirled around the car like a hellish tornado.

“Where!?” Tira snapped out of her daydream.

“Who was it?” Dodger demanded as if Rauno was supposed to be able to recognize someone standing in the dark.

“Don't know,” Rauno shrugged. As Dodger leaned over to look out the window toward the forest, he felt something hard jab against his chest. He unzipped his jacket partially and reached into his pocket to find the wolf and moon Starglass sculpture that Karn gave to him earlier that day. He gripped it hard in his hand to get it out of the way as he peer out into the grassy meadow.

“I don’t see anything,” Tira strained her eyes. Dodger felt the Starglass just about resonate in his hand as he thought about Karn. Why did Karn just disappear? What did Karn have to do with Bull? After the morning they had spent together, Dodger felt that they had finally become friends. The idea that Karn’s life would be endangered because of Bull filled Dodger’s mind with fiery fear and rage.

“I’m going out there to find them!” Dodger swung the car door open and stepped out into a swirling, icy darkness that wrapped its frigid fingers all around his body. He was blinded as he stomped past the headlights and into the grassy meadow. He was finally going to find that asshole, Bull Brandish, and figure out what the hell this secret bullshit was all about. He didn’t care how big Bull was. Dodger was full of Silver Courage; all the courage he needed to face Bull. Behind him, the engine idled, echoing all around him like an unsettling, out of tune song. The trees all turned to watch Dodger as he stood in knee high grass, his body giving off steam from an anger he could not contain.

“Do you see anything?” Tira called out through a rolled down window.

“No. There’s nobody out here,” Dodger turned around to face the car. A voice rang out, piercing through the hum of the engine.

“Look out behind you!” Rauno shouted with all the air in his lungs as he kicked his door open.

A familiar voice echoed from years and years ago, reaching out to him from an endless sea of forgotten nights. “Look out behind you!” Dodger had no time to turn around

and see what was happening. By sheer instinct, Dodger's arms shot up to protect his face. He heard a guttural, gurgling growl as a terrible weight slammed against his arms, forcing him off his feet and down onto his back. A slick, wet substance splashed onto his face as some shredding, tearing force snagged onto the knuckles of his left fist. Dodger had only just barely managed to protect his own life. At first, he felt nothing but the adrenaline pumping through his body, but as the weight of some hungry, sick creature stomped down onto his chest, he saw the end of his life barreling toward him like a train. For a fraction of a second, Dodger locked eyes with the cougar that was about to take a bite out of his neck.

"Häviä siitä!" Rauno roared out, his eyes glowing in the night as he leaped forward with a single, brutal, devastating kick. The beast screamed out a terrible, sickening laugh as it was launched off of Dodger. With a deep cracking sound, the beast was launched into the tall grass of the meadow. With no time to think, Dodger scrambled to his feet to look at the back of his hand, torn open by the claws of the beast. Still, clutched tightly in his hand from pure reflex was the small Starglass Karn had given him, tarnished with red that glowed in the moonlight. "There! Dodger! The grass is moving over there!" Rauno pointed frantically.

"No problem," Dodger replied with a cool grunt, gritting his teeth and putting on his poker face. "Six yards," he muttered. Dodger's survival instinct activated and without even thinking about it, with a nearly imperceptible flick of his wrist, he grabbed one of his three throwing knives from his belt and whipped his arm forward faster than any eye could see. It wasn't the first time he had throwing a knife with the intention to kill. Hitting a target was one thing, but hitting a

moving predator hell-bent on killing you, that's a whole other story. Dodger blinked and saw a flash of some distant memory, as if catching a glimpse of a faded old photo. He had done this before... but when?

Just as the cougar raised its head up from the grass, Dodger's shining steel embedded itself deep in the creature's neck. With a sickening yelp, the creature fell back, flailing its legs. Yet just as Dodger took a second to breathe, the creature contorted its spine in no way a living creature possibly ever could and pulled itself back onto its feet. On a flattened patch of grass, the cougar gurgled a blood filled hiss as it posed, ready to pounce.

"Shit! It lives!" Rauno shouted, looking down to realize he had no weapon with him. Without taking a second to think, Dodger sent a second knife through the air. With inhuman precision, the second knife found its target, sliding alongside the first knife, forming a deadly pair of scissors. The creature recoiled for only a second. There was no way it could survive that, but how was it still standing? There was no time to waste. Dodger grabbed his last knife and wound up his arm.

For a fraction of an instant, Dodger hesitated as he wondered what would happen if he couldn't stop the cougar with this last knife. No. There was no time for thinking like that. He never planned for failure. He only ever planned out his path to victory.

He couldn't afford to miss. He had to protect his friend. With an ear piercing whistling, the knife flew through the air. In less than a blink of an eye, Dodger's throw had found its mark. His arm went numb as the third knife embedded itself

tightly between the first two, shooting off sparks into the night like fireworks. The beast fell back and trembled for only a second before it got back onto its feet. It posed again, its yellow, devilish eyes aimed directly at Rauno. Dodger had to do something. He had no throwing knives left. He had no weapon. He didn't even think to bring a gun. He just hadn't thought at all. In a heartbeat that lasted an eternity, the sick, twisted beast lunged into the air, totally disregarding Dodger's attacks. The clouds above parted, casting a sickly light upon the beast that had risen up from hell.

The fur and skin had come peeled away from the animal, revealing sickly flesh and bones. Throbbing, cancerous, pulsating tumors covered the animal's body with a hellish hunger. With claws glistening in the dim moonlight, the beast left the ground, heading directly for Rauno. There was nothing Dodger could do. Rauno's eyes, for the first time since the death of his father, were filled with utter resignation and fear. He knew he was going to die. As he locked eyes with Dodger, he felt a terrible guilt at the thought of making Dodger feel sad for him. No, Rauno shook off that fear and gave Dodger a calm look of reassurance. He couldn't stand the idea of making his friend feel bad about his death. Rauno calmly looked to Dodger, nodding to him as if saying goodbye.

Dodger watched as the milliseconds trickled down the hourglass, the beast tearing through the air, only half an instant away from landing its claws into Rauno. Dodger felt his left hand throb from the pain of being shredded by that beast's filthy claws. At first, his hand felt cold, but as Dodger's desperation to save his friend reached a boiling point, his hand began to burn. He wasn't sure how, but he needed to do something, anything, to save Rauno. He couldn't stand the

thought of being useless to someone who needed him. But what could he do? He was just as helpless as Rauno.

Dodger's heart throbbed with a burning intensity as a resonating sound reached out to him from within the darkness. A harmonic ringing deafened him, rising up like a towering ocean wave, carrying voices of a choir from all around him. The voices extended their countless arms out from all directions, reaching directly into Dodger's chest, grabbing an unbreakable hold of his heart. A crack of thunder rang out as Dodger leaped out between Rauno and the beast, swinging his left fist, clutching his Starglass.

A blinding, brilliant light flooded the meadow, blasting the shadows of the night far into the crevices of the distant landscape. Dodger could not stop himself from yelling at the top of his lungs as he punched forward with his left hand, waiting to connect with the beast's hellish jaws. But there was no contact. He felt some unseen force pull his arm away from him, as if forcefully dragging his spirit from his body. He opened his eyes only to be blinded by the explosive light.

The air around him swirled as if a tornado had just touched down upon his head, viciously extracting the air from his lungs. He couldn't breathe but he just could not afford to fail. He had to keep going. He clutched hard onto the Starglass even as his bones felt like they would be ground to dust. He would save Rauno no matter what it cost him.

Dodger's vision blurred as the thunderous light flashed out of existence, just as abruptly as it had appeared. Before him on the ground, the cougar lay motionless, smoking with lingering flames. Dodger fell to his knees, suddenly unable to

control any of his limbs. He tried to draw breath but it seemed his lungs had been utterly flattened. The choir of voices gently eased out of existence like a receding ocean tide, leaving a painful ringing in Dodger's ears. He could only hear distant echoes of Tira and Rauno shouting to him as his vision dimmed. He felt himself slip ever farther into an empty, unfeeling void, and despite his will to live, he took comfort in falling away from his life and into the heavy shadow of the unknown.

