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WARNING: May contain coarse language, violence, gore or sexual content. Reader discretion is advised.

Chapter 9. "Just This Once"

"Do you mind telling me the story of your trip coming here?" Shari asked and took a bite of the fish.

He looked at her puzzled. "Have I not?"

"Not in detail. I only know about bits and pieces. I don't think I've heard you tell the whole story. From when you were first tailed by the men to when you broke down the door."

He sighed as he chewed more of the broccoli. "What were those men to you?" He asked and looked at her with intrigue.

Shari swallowed hard and took a drink from her cup. "I don't know much of one of them other than the fact they were friends," she said as she looked down at her plate. She seemed to become a bit emotional. "One of them was a merchant that I would occasionally buy from. But the..." Shari brought her left hand up to her mouth as her eyes began to tear. "He was a loving father. I treated his daughter for a pretty serious disease." She used the back of her finger to wipe her eyes. "I'm sure he only went along with it because, despite working at the bakery, they were still paying off the medical costs."

"I see," he said and returned to eating.

"I'm mostly sad because he left his wife and daughter behind for some foolish reason...being talked into attacking someone just because they had some coin on them."

He glanced her way when she looked over.

"I can't blame you for what you did. You were defending yourself. But I," she said and looked back at her food. "I can still be a little angry."

He continued eating as Shari composed herself.

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"Thank you for subjugating the lair of that beast," the pudgy man in the fancy clothes said as he pressed a stack of coins into Viktor's hands.

"Yeah," Viktor said as he rolled the coins in his palm.

"Our fish stocks will take time to replenish, but thanks to you we don't have to fear another attack." The pudgy man reached into a cabinet and handed over something wrapped in corn husks. "Some smoked and cured fish for a bonus," he said as he beamed gleefully.

"Yeah," Viktor said as he placed them in his knapsack. He used his fingers to pull open his coin purse and dropped the coin inside. He lifted the tie rope to close it and buckled the pack closed.

"Stop by anytime," the man said and waved as Viktor left the stall.

"Yeah," Viktor said as he hoisted the pack and walked towards the gate. "Not in this life," he thought as his left knee began to ache.

Murmurs and shouts rang out behind him. He walked to the side as a carriage passed by. He couldn't stop the eyes following him.

"Two," he thought. "No, three. Not a threat. Sword skills are minimal. No armor. They won't attack close to town. Probably within a few hours walk."

Viktor passed through the gate and made his way along the path towards the forest. It was about an hour walk to get to the forest and about a half hour when he could definitely hear the footsteps coming from behind. A sword was drawn followed by two others. One was a more hesitant draw.

"Turn around slowly and drop the coin, friend," called a raspy voice from behind.

Viktor stopped and sighed. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the three men that had been eyeing him for some time. He recognized the one body because of the

gold pendant hanging from the neck. He was tailing him while he was speaking to the pudgy merchant. The other two were fresh bodies he didn't recognize. "Recruited two desperate men for your fool's errand," he thought as he slowly turned to face the men.

The men standing behind the voice began to move in to flank Viktor. He glanced to the sides as they closed in.

"Do as I say and no one has to get hurt. Heh heh heh."

"Just d-d-do it," the one on the right stuttered as he thumbed the ring on his finger with nervousness.

"Him first," Viktor thought as he grabbed his sword.

Viktor tugged at the handle but the sword was catching on the scabbard. "DAMMIT!!" He cursed in his head as the two moved in while raising their swords.

Viktor dropped the handle and reached to the knives behind his shield. He grabbed one and threw it into the left shoulder of the nervous one. A shrill cry came from that one and his sword hit the ground. He turned managed to get his shield in front of the blade coming from behind. He finally drew his sword with a few tugs and lunged. His sword easily pierced the stomach of this one. He glanced over and dipped his head behind the shield.

"Fucking DOG!!" The raspy voice shouted as his sword caught in the top of Viktor's shield.

Viktor twirled on his feet as his blade struck the man in the back. It didn't penetrate because of Viktor's dull blade and this one's spine. His eye caught the movement of the other one getting to his feet. The loud one fell to his knees and dropped his sword. Viktor spun to the left and his arm followed as the blade punched through the neck of the one trying to stand. Blood and tissue sprayed out behind the blade. Viktor felt the man's blade fall near his right foot. Viktor dashed to the one clutching the knife in his hands. The blade pierced through his throat and Viktor pulled to the left to create more visceral art. The loud one coughed as he clutched his back with his left arm and crawled to reach his sword with his right hand. Viktor walked toward the loud one.

"N-NO PLEASE!" The raspy voice cried and froze in place. This one sat on his heels and held his hand out straight, palm facing Viktor. "I'll pay you anything...just let me..."

Viktor stepped into the swing as the blade punched through his neck. "That'll shut you up," Viktor thought as the loud one began choking on his own blood.

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"Okay, okay," Shari cried. "I'm losing my appetite over here."

Vilkas nodded and scooped some more of the broccoli and cheese onto his plate.

"By the sounds of it, the baker's son was talked into it after all." Shari sighed as she chewed. "I know I wasn't there and I know I don't think like you, but if he looked that nervous, I feel like I would have let him go."

"That kind of thought will get you killed," he said and took a bite of the vegetable.

"I know," Shari said quietly and swallowed. She let out another short sigh.

"After that, I took anything of value to sell and their coin. I went to the river to wash up and clean the wound on my foot. I was tired from the morning and the fight so I took a nap."

"When did you meet the little one?" Shari asked as she placed her last bite into her mouth.

"He woke me up. He was a bother with his speech, but he did help hold my shield so I could put it back on my arm."

"That little," Shari muttered. "He's not supposed to be out that far."

"I sent him home, but he came running to me when I was almost here."

Shari lit up as she swallowed her food and looked at him. "I thought I heard him crying as he passed the house. He was calling out to you," she said and her eyes began to water. "If he didn't know you were coming..." Shari brought a hand up to her mouth.

"I wouldn't have ran the rest of the way. I had him hide behind your wood pile."

Viktor continued the story of defeating the bandits. He ended the story after telling Socorro to head home to his family.

"If you weren't here," Shari said and trailed off as tears fell from her eyes.

"If you didn't save my life that night, you may never know the full story," he said and stood. He looked over at her and said, "Thank you," while nodding.

"You're welcome," she said as she looked up at him. She sniffled and wiped her eyes.

He grabbed his plate and fork and placed them in the wash basin. He dumped a bit of water into the basin.

"I can do that," Shari said and walked to him with her plate and fork.

He shook his head. "You prepared it. I'll clean it."

Shari smiled brightly, her eyes squinting. She placed her plate on top of his and returned to the table. He opened the sour\citrus jar and grabbed a washcloth. He began the slow process of wiping the plates.

"I know I shouldn't say anything," Shari began as she watched him work. "You're making good with what you have, but I just feel like I should be helping somehow."

He stopped scrubbing and looked at her. "It's fine. Sometimes it feels like this is how I should be doing things."

Shari looked up at him with her analytical look. "You were...born right handed? Weren't you?"

He nodded and returned his gaze to focus on wiping.

Shari gasped and stepped back. She placed the pot she held on the counter and wrapped her hands around his right arm at the bicep. "How...um...did this happen?" She asked as she traced her thumbs near the scar under his shoulder.

"I was very young. It was several years after I was taken from mother. I was a part of a group that was mining...something. The men that watched over us were nothing like the previous group I was a part of."

"You were a slave," Shari said with a questioning tone. "You were separated from your mother by slavers and sold. Then sold again to the mining company?"

He nodded. "In a way," he said and placed the dish into the drying rack. He started on the second plate as he continued. "I don't remember everything, but I remember the first people were nice nobles that had myself and a few others as cleaners of the house and carriers when they traveled. It was a better few years than what came next. They were attacked on the way to a large city. We were sold by the bandits and forced to work in a mine. Several years later, I remember being so hungry that I began to run to find my mother."

He felt Shari rub his back as he spoke. She was resting her head on his shoulder and rubbing his arm as well. It made it slightly difficult to move it to clean. It made it more difficult to contain his warming body and the feelings it brought with it.

"The one master was deadly with his whip. I didn't get far. I remember the tail of his whip latching on to my arm and squeezing so tight I thought my arm was being ripped off. I fell to the ground as blood pooled around the leather. I pulled my arm free and made my way into the nearby forest. They left me there to die as they closed the mine for the night. I fell down. Something told me to lie on it to stop the bleeding. I saw a mushroom clustered on a tree. It was good but not filling. I reached out and bit into another. It was bitter. I swallowed only a bit of it and spit out the rest. I woke up feeling weak and threw up for, what felt like, a long time. The bleeding stopped and I couldn't feel pain. But I could barely move my arm."

"Sounds like it pinched your arm so hard it damaged the nerves and muscle. Growth of the muscle was dramatically reduced and I'm guessing you can't even feel my hand right now."

"Barely. I know it's there because I can see it. So that's how I know you're touching it. You would have really squeeze or stab my arm for me to feel much of anything. Even then it's no different than when stuck with a needle."

Shari sighed. "There's nothing I can think of that can undo that kind of trauma. Perhaps after it happened, but now..."

"It's fine. Every swordsman needs a shield," he said and placed the plate in the rack.

He glanced over and watched as Shari traced her fingers over all the scars on his forearm. "Still, it's part of your body. I can't imagine what it would look like without the shield covering it."

"Most of those were from before I had the money to buy one," he said and rubbed the tines of a fork between the cloth and his fingers.

"I find your body medically fascinating. Your rate of healing is incredible. And to overcome not having your dominant hand," she said and trailed off.

"Is that why you 'like' me? Because I'm 'medically fascinating'?" He asked dryly.

She stopped rubbing his arm and dropped her arm from his back. "Don't say that," she said quietly. "It's not like that."

"Hmph," he grunted and placed the fork into a container on the side of the cup drying rods.

He heard Shari sniffle. She slowly walked behind him and went into her room.

The sun was about to go down when he finished washing and drying the dishes. Shari never came back out of her room. "Must be tired," he thought and made his way to his room. He stopped just outside the room and listened but couldn't hear anything. He quietly closed the door behind him and fell into the cot. He felt tired himself. The remnants of the fever were trying to hold on, but he figured he'd be fine in the morning.

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He awoke to the sound of fighting. He grabbed his sword and made his way out of the room. Shari's door was open but she wasn't inside. He quickly made his way to the dining area. She wasn't here, either. He looked and saw the front door was open. He ran out of the door and into the street. He could see those men attacking the village. The beast hating humans wearing the dark blue tunics with the red emblem.

That woman that looked like Shari ran towards him. She was sobbing uncontrollably. She fell to her knees in front of him. He looked down and saw Socorro dead in her arms. Blood poured out from his chest. He felt his anger take over his entire being.

He ran towards the pub. The men were dragging people from inside and killing them. They discarded the bodies in the street. Their laughing was about as loud as the cries coming from inside.

The first blade thrust went through the closest bandit. He kicked off the body from his blade and parried several attacks. His second thrust impaled the chest of another.

He swayed and danced to avoid more swords. The third strike took the head off of a shorter one. The fourth strike took off an arm while the fifth strike spilled entrails. The sixth thrust went into the top of the rib cage of the one holding his missing arm.

A shriek to his left. "Shari!!!" He called out as she was held in front of the last attacker.

The bandit wrapped his left arm around her neck. The bandit laughed as he watched a sword slowly pierce from out of her stomach. Tears fell from her eyes as she slumped to the ground. He screamed in rage and tackled the bandit. He sat up and laid his sword across the neck of the killer and pushed with all his might. His sword clicked against the wood floor as if cutting the broccoli stem.

"Shari!" He cried and quickly stood.

He stepped over to her and knelt next to her. He felt tears spring from his eyes as he lifted her head into his arm. Blood spilled from her mouth as she coughed.

"Hup," she said quietly as she looked up at him with those beautiful, yet dying eyes. "Wa-hup."

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"WAKE UP!!!" Someone yelled.

His eyes flew open and he reached out to the figure's neck. "I'll kill you," he growled as he grasped the neck of the bandit.

"V-il-ga...way...gup," they gasped as he choked them.

His eyes adjusted to the dark. His hand was clenched around Shari's neck. "Shari!" He cried as he pulled her down into his chest. He hugged her to his chest as he heaved life back into his body. She gasped air into her own lungs as his surroundings became clearer. "You're okay," he said as he felt the anger leave him. "You're okay," he gasped.

"You were screaming in your sleep again," she strained to say as she brought her hand up to his shoulder. "And you need to stop choking me when you wake up," she said and punched his shoulder.

He held her as he calmed down. "I'm sorry," he said and gasped another breath into his chest. He sighed the breath out and squeezed her. He let her go and watched as she pushed herself up to face him.

"You're okay now," she said and climbed onto the cot. She wrapped her right arm around his head and pulled it into her shoulder. "What on earth were you dreaming?" She asked with a consoling tone.

"Bandits...killed Socorro and...the people...and you," he muttered over her shoulder. He could feel his body shake with anger as he spoke.

"It was a dream, sweetie," she whispered sweetly and rubbed his back with her left hand. "He's fine. I'm fine. You're fine."

They stayed like that for several minutes. "Yeah," he finally said and sighed, his body relaxing. "I'm sorry," he said and hugged her.

"Let's get you back to sleep," she said and let her hand slide down his back and the other down the back of his head.

She pulled back and he let his arm return to his side. "Yeah," he said and laid back down.

Shari twisted her lower half around and scooted down. She moved his right arm and laid her head on his shoulder. She placed her hand on his chest and kneaded her hand in the tuft of fur poking out from the top of the shirt between his collarbones.

"Is this okay?" He asked as he glanced over at her.

"Just this once," she said, closing her eyes. "I wasn't having a good dream either," she said and ran her hand across the fabric covering his chest.

He closed his eyes. He could feel a pleasant prickling sensation wherever her hand moved on his chest. He could feel her warmth seep into his side.

"Are...*you* okay?"

He could feel her hand leave his chest but now it felt like her claws were dancing across the fabric. That sensation doubled in intensity.

"Yeah," she said as her claws danced across his stomach

He felt a strange stirring in his groin. "Shari," he said quietly. "That 'erogenous' thing you mentioned...I think that might be happening when you do that."

Shari gasped as her claws jumped from his stomach. "Sorry," she whined and placed her hand on his chest. Shari giggled as she nuzzled against his arm and rested her muzzle on his chest.

He listened to her soft breathing and his strained breathing through his nose. It felt strange having someone next to him as he was about to sleep. Especially this close. He felt the need to see if she had enough room. There was still plenty of cot to his left. He carefully pulled his body to the left a bit.

"Mmm?" She hummed.

"More room for you," he said quietly.

"Mmm," she hummed and scooted her body close to his.

She draped her leg over his and sighed contently. He cringed as it felt like his head was going to explode. His heart started beating rapidly as his mind raced. His face felt extremely warm.

She giggled and scratched his chest a few times before settling in again. "Don't know if I can sleep with all that noise."

"Sorry," he said and closed his eyes. "I don't understand!" He screamed in his head.

[Shari](#) belongs to [Celeste](#)