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

Chapter 19. “Sweet Boy”

After a few hours of learning numbers and the basics of adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing them, Alida called it a night. Alida insisted on Vilkas bathing first. Vilkas argued Rochus should go first since he was already napping in his chair before she woke him up. Vilkas won this round.

Vilkas had a lot to think about as he lay his head upon the pillow. He was becoming less nervous about telling Shari how he felt and more excited about being able to see her again. He tossed and turned before he finally exhausted himself.

He woke up to the smell of breakfast. He dressed and made his way to the table. Today, they had eggs with yolk, ham slices and thin-sliced bread with spread optional. After Alida’s custom, he ate and brought out the dictionary. Alida helped him by pointing out common words. After about an hour of that, he went with Alida to pick up some supplies - or ‘provisions’ as he just learned.

When they arrived back and the provisions were put away, he started on some math problems. Alida added to his learning by showing him how to measure things. She grabbed her spool of tape and measured his body so she could make him a few more ‘garments’. After measuring his feet, she excused herself so she could make a ‘tailor’ supply run. Despite Vilkas wanting to go, she had him stay behind. It felt like she was hiding something.

He was right. Alida walked in and placed her materials on the table. On top was a pair of leather boots.

Vilkas looked at her ‘sternly’. “I hope you didn’t buy those for me. They look too large for Rochus.”

Alida flashed her signature smile and chuckled. “Guilty as charged.”

“Why?”

“Cleaning the houses can be dangerous for unprotected feet. If this will help you to stay even a little bit more healthy so we don’t trouble Shari, it’ll be worth it. Plus, I can teach you how to tie them.”

“I can tie boots.”

Alida looked disappointed.

“Watch,” he said, feeling he had to ‘prove’ it to her.

Vilkas pushed back his chair and took one of the boots. He turned to face her so she could watch. These boots were made to pull over the trousers to just under the knee. The trick was making sure they didn’t rub on the back of the hock. His toes went in easy enough. He pulled it past where his larger foot pad angled up to the hock - or heel. He continued to pull until the bottom of his foot pressed into the insole. He wiggled his toes until the angle of the leather felt comfortable around the hock. He lifted the tongue of the boot taut. He used his finger to pull the ‘lace’ tight at several spots as he moved up the length of the boot. He grabbed the knotted ends of the lace and pulled until it felt snug against his leg. Using his right hand as best he could, he held that end of the lace still as he twisted the other end around and under the crossing. He pulled the ends tight and proceeded to do it again.

“Hold it,” Alida interrupted. She knelt down and undid the knot. “All this does is make it ridiculously difficult to take off later. Watch me,” she said and held the ends in each hand. “Hey, Kitty-Kitty, can you get me?” She spoke\sang as she moved her right hand to the left. “Hey, Kitty-Kitty, come back and see,” she continued as she moved the left hand to the right. She switched her hands. “Wait, Kitty, stop,” as she moved the right side to the middle. “Duck! Kitty drops,” as she moved that end under the crossed lace and pulled the ends tight. She used her fingers to make a loop with the left hand. “Look, Kitty, at the bunny.” She crossed the right hand around the loop. “Silly Kitty. You can’t get me. But wait kitty,” she said as she pushed the straight end into her pinched fingers. “Don’t eat me, ‘cause *you’re* a bunny!” Alida sang as she slid her left fingers down to grab the pushed through part and pulled the loops to look like rabbit ears.

“Am I the only one that feels awkward with the sight of an old woman singing to a massive man about tying shoes?” Rochus quipped from his chair.

"I'll make you feel something, you Grumpy Gus," Alida warned with fake anger as she shook her right fist at him. "Call me 'old' again!"

"Still love you, Silly Goose."

Alida giggled and looked up to Vilkas. "This makes it easy to untie. Just pull one string and the whole thing comes undone. Now you try and..."

"Without the song," Rochus chimed in.

Alida sighed. "Without the song."

Vilkas slipped on the other boot and snugged the laces up. He pulled the lace ends tight, then dropped his right arm and tossed the left side over. He grabbed the free end and pulled it up and dropped it into the hole that was made. He dropped the ends, grabbed them and pulled them tight. He squeezed part of the lace and grabbed the lower end in his fingers. He held up the loop and swiveled his right hand around. He used his second finger to push the lace into his pinched fingers and pushed his first finger through the loop, then pulled his hands apart.

"Very well done, dear," Alida beamed.

His insides tingled and it brought a smile to his face. He felt 'pride' in what he just did.

"I was actually looking forward to the song from him," Rochus mumbled.

"We can do it again," Alida mocked.

"Hmph."

"Walk around a bit so you can break them in."

Vilkas walked around the table and back to where Alida was standing. "They feel great," he said with a smile. He felt compelled to hug her. He lurched forward as he brought his hand out. He pulled back and pressed his lips together as he slightly narrowed his eyes.

Alida's eyes lit up and she held her hands out. "Go ahead."

He gave a partial smile as he stepped into her awaiting arms and hugged her.
“Thank you, Alida.”

“You’re very welcome, dear, but please go easy on mamma,” she groaned in his grasp.

“S-sorry,” he said and eased his grip.

Alida giggled. He counted to three in his head and pulled away.

“Was...that a good amount of time for that hug?”

“Yes, dear. I suppose I never thought about appropriate time limits for hugs before.” She brought a finger to her lips. “I think it all depends on the situation. Some things are quick hugs while others last for a while. See, you are smarter than you think you are.”

“He’d be smart to keep his hands off my wife,” Rochus interjected.

“Oh, Rochy,” Alida mocked as she held out her hands while walking towards him. She leaned over and tried to hug him. “There, there.”

“Gawl-darnit, woman,” Rochus complained as he brushed off her arms.

They ended their play session with a kiss and brushed their nose across the other’s. It made Vilkas remember Shari’s kiss and when they touched their noses. He looked down at the floor and sighed.

Vilkas continued to alternate between studying new words and math. After lunch, Alida asked him to go on a walk with her. She handed him a stack of 5 coins.

“You can do anything you want with these,” she said as they walked toward the town center.

“I want to give them to Shari.”

“You are such a sweet boy,” Alida beamed. “Not today. This is for you to spend on what you want. Shari’s not here.”

“I’ll give them back. This should cover the...”

"No, dear," Alida said as she shook her head. "For *you*."

Vilkas held the coin in his hand. "I don't want anything, though."

As he pondered what he could possibly spend this on, he picked up a floral scent. He made his way past the town square and to the stall on the other side of the blacksmith. He felt drawn to go inside, but held fast as he stood in front of a stall that had flowers and jewelry. He looked over the bundles and picked one up that had various white and yellow flowers in it. He tucked the stems between his body and his right hand.

"I'd like to purchase these," he said as he held out a coin.

The vendor was staring at him the entire time with wide eyes. "Uh," she cleared her throat. "You can get another, uh, three bundles for that unless you want change."

Vilkas looked at the sign and bit his lip. "I read the sign wrong," he mumbled and looked back over the flowers. "Do you deliver, too?" He asked as he looked up at the still wide-eyed squirrel.

"Yeah, uh, yes we can, i-if you'd like."

"Could you please deliver one like this to Shari's clinic in two days?" He asked as he pointed to a bundle that had assorted blue and purple flowers. He picked up another bundle that had a variety of flowers. It didn't have as strong of a scent. He placed it back down. "And one like this to Tangi and Valeska at the pub on your way to the clinic...please."

"S-sure," she said and made a note on some paper. "And another? O-or would you like change?"

"The rest is for your time."

She looked puzzled as she held out her hand. "O-o-k-kay."

"Thank you," he said and dropped the coin in her hand.

He spotted books on his way here. It made him think of Rochus. He turned and walked towards the shop

"Thank you!" The squirrel called out.

He turned and smiled at her. She seemed to relax and smiled back.

Alida chuckled as they made their way to the shop just before the dentist. There were a few books outside. The door was open, so he stepped inside.

“Afternoon...uh...”

Vilkas saw an older human peer up over a book at his counter with his mouth open with a raised eyebrow.

“Do you have any new books?”

The man took off his glasses and wiped them off with a cloth. “I...I do, actually.” He placed his glasses back on and walked around the counter. “Alida, a pleasure as always,” he said as he looked past Vilkas.

“All mine, Roger,” she replied.

“Is this for you or that old so-and-so?”

“Not me. It’s for Rochus. I’m still learning,” Vilkas said as he looked over the books lining the shelves around the whole room.

“Well...then,” Roger said as he strolled to a section next to the counter.

Vilkas noticed the man...Roger held his hands in loose fists by his chest and rubbed his thumbs against his first fingers as he walked. He recognized this as a sign of nobility. Or, at least, those of nobility tended to walk as such.

“Ah, yes. Here we are. I’m sure he’ll appreciate this one,” Roger said as he pulled a thick book from the top shelf. He felt the cover and turned the book to look at the binding. “I only read a bit of the first chapter so far.” He tipped his head back and gave several different expressions. “Seems a writer pulled up stakes and followed around, as he put it, a rumor. A man that was a ruthless killer. Viktor. A large...wolf...with a...lame...arm...”

Vilkas glanced over at Roger. His head was down and he was looking at Vilkas through his glasses. Vilkas narrowed his eyes. Roger twisted his lips in a strange way. It was as if he put something sour in his mouth.

“Perhaps,” he said and placed the book back. “Here we are.” He pulled out a thinner book with a brown cover. “A nautical tale of pirates. A journal, of sorts, from the captain.”

Vilkas gave a partial smile. “How much?”

“Just,” Roger said and very audibly cleared his throat in a seemingly excessive way. “One coin, good sir.”

Vilkas slid two coins from his palm and walked to the counter. Roger walked around the back of the counter and placed the book down. Vilkas placed the coins on the counter and slid the rest in his tunic pocket. “Thank you,” he said and smiled as he grabbed the book.

“There’s...two...coins here,” Roger said in a snobbishly noble way.

“A down payment for the other book when Rochus comes by,” he said as he turned to walk away.

“Rrrriight. Take care now. ‘Til another day, fair lady. Tell that so-and-so I expect him soon, now.”

“See you soon, Roger. Take care of yourself,” Alida said back and followed Vilkas out the door.

Vilkas walked into the street and turned to Alida. He had a somber look. “Please, do not read that book. I don’t know if it’s about me, but I don’t want anyone to read that book if it is. Buy it and burn it. Just, please, don’t read it.”

Alida wasn’t looking at him as he spoke. She finally looked up at him and flashed her signature smile. “Dear, I don’t know *that* you. I know *this* you. And I know *this* you just bought *me* flowers and *my husband* a new book with money that was for *him*.” She stepped over and grabbed his arm through the sling. “I don’t think I have to teach you the value of money. I think you have a pretty good head for it already, dear. Let’s go home.”

Vilkas looked from her smiling face to the road ahead. “Yeah.”

When they arrived back at the house, Alida took her flowers and began to prep them to put in a nice ‘vase’. Rochus appreciated his book and promised to read it after he finished the one he was currently reading.

“So, Vilkas, how do the boots feel?” Alida asked as she pinched a leaf from one of the stems.

“They feel great. I’m not used to wearing boots, though,” he said as he looked down at his raised foot. He put his foot back on the floor. “I’ve only worn them in the snow regions.”

“That’s wonderful. I was afraid they might be too tight. With how well the roads are, not many of us beast folk wear footwear. I think working on the cleanup has been the first time in ages I’ve worn something on my feet.” Alida placed the flower in the vase. “You can take them off if you like.”

Vilkas looked from her to the boots and back. “No. I want to get used to them for when we go back to work.”

Alida picked up another flower and smelled it. She hummed and looked over at him. “Alright then, dear. How about we work on a few more things besides books.”

“Yeah. Sure,” he said and sat at the table.

Alida continued to ‘prune’ the flowers as she spoke. “Some things we taught our son were good manners, honesty, respect, and responsibility. You have some good manners already. But some manners cannot be expressed with words. Call me old fashioned, but I still feel special when father opens a door and holds it for me. This goes for strangers as well. If someone is following you in the pub, for example, it’s good manners to hold the door for them as well. When father was more nimble, I would hold the door for him so he could bring in supplies. Even now father will try to carry something that’s heavy. Other things, such as when we turn in for the night, he’ll hold my hand and escort me to the bedroom. I’ll link my arm in his and he’ll walk to the side where the carriages travel. He keeps an eye out for things I may step in and he steers us to avoid them - like water puddles. If it’s raining, father will step out first to open and hold the umbrella.”

Vilkas made sure to pay close attention. He couldn’t help but imagine himself with Shari in these situations. It made him feel equally happy and sad.

“When father met my parents, he made sure to introduce himself and shake my father’s hand. Eye contact. It’s good to look at the person that’s speaking to you.” Alida placed a flower into the vase and turned to look at him. “You’re doing a wonderful job of

that already, dear. I think it's due to your curiosity and willingness to learn. But don't ever stop doing that either. You never stop learning."

Vilkas couldn't help the warm feeling he felt or the smile he gave.

Alida turned back to her work. "I know that sounds untrue while I'm standing here not facing you. I want to make sure to cherish your gift for as long as possible, so I do apologize for not facing you, dear."

"I understand."

Alida chuckled. "Such a sweet boy," she whispered and picked up another flower. "When we go to the pub to eat, father will pull out the chair for me or he waits until I'm seated at the counter before he sits. He allows me to order first. If it's surprisingly chilly out, father will give me his coat to keep me warm. We share the duty now, but father used to come to the bedroom when I woke up with tea or he'd have it ready when I came out to help prepare breakfast." She sighed as she placed another flower in the vase. "I suppose good manners and chivalry are much the same." She turned to Vilkas. "These are just some examples. I think you have a good idea of what I'm talking about. Right, dear?"

"I think I understand."

"Alright, then. I'll go over some more things as I think of them," she said and resumed preparing the flowers. "I understand you want to avoid speaking about your past, but honesty is a good thing to have. If you constantly lie to those around you, nobody will take your word as truth. Another thing that goes with these things is respect. If you have good manners and are honest with others, you gain their respect."

"Shari taught me a bit on that."

"That's good. I won't dwell on that, then. How about compassion and forgiveness. These two can be grouped together sometimes. Compassion is when you try to comfort someone when they are having a hard time."

"Is that why Shari," he began and looked at the table while biting his lip. "I would tell Shari something and she would cry and hug me. Is...is that..."

"Yes, dear," Alida said as she looked over at him. "Shari's job is full of compassion. It's another reason everyone just adores her. That apple fell far out from that tree." Alida hung her head as she looked back at the vase. "If that tree just had her

mother in it, that apple would have fallen straight down. I'm not sure if she was always like that, but Shari is the spitting image of her mother in that regard."

"Sometimes it seems the good ones are destined for greater things in the afterlife," Rochus said with a somber tone.

"Very true," Alida said and picked up another flower. "Well, it seems Shari was setting you on the right track. Did she tell you about forgiveness?"

Vilkas thought for a moment and looked over at her. "I'm not sure."

"Well, forgiveness is when someone does something wrong and you forgive them. Despite what they've done, you don't push them out, you bring them back in. Um, you accept their apology for the wrong they've done. You continue being friends with them after a time of healing."

"I think I understand. I think Shari has done that with me a few times."

"It's because you're still learning, dear. She can't keep any ill feelings towards someone that truly didn't know any better." She turned and seemed to cringe. "Sorry if that sounded rude, dear."

Vilkas shook his head. "No. As I told Shari: Words don't hurt. Weapons do."

She giggled and continued working. "That's a very mature way to look at it."

"Sure beats my way of thinking," Rochus said.

"Father can have a bit of a temper. Well, regardless, everyone makes mistakes. It's how we act and feel after that mistake that helps us grow. Let's say you swing your sword left when it should have swung right, you know next time to swing right. If you keep swinging left, you'll never learn from your mistakes. Again, never stop learning. Everyone follows their own path in life. If that makes them happy, then good for them. If that path leads down a rocky path, try to correct it. Life will be too difficult if you keep following that rocky path. That's why I think it's wonderful of you to put down your sword and opened your eyes to the wonders the world has to offer us. Happiness and love are the two best things a person can have in their life, in my opinion."

"And booze," Rochus insinuated and laughed.

Alida looked over at Vilkas. "Pay him no mind, dear."

"Booze is good, but I think being able to feel more than anger is one of the best things that's happened for me," Vilkas said, then looked down at the table. "But, I do agree that feeling love for someone is...strong...powerful. It feels wonderful, but it also hurts."

Alida came over to him and hugged around his head. "It does, dear," she said and pulled away. She ran her hand over his head and off his neck several times. "Never stop loving. Never stop learning. Never stop being a good person. Never stop being such a sweet boy, Vilkas."

He spent the rest of the night working on math problems that Alida gave him and looking through the dictionary to learn more words. After dinner, he helped Alida clean up the house. After a bath, he lay in bed doing his best to not think about Shari. It was no use. He clung to the pillow as if he were hugging her. He found himself asleep soon after.

The following day, Alida continued with a few more life lessons. She began teaching him some points of history and places of interest around the area. She even had a map of the known world. Try as he might, he couldn't remember any of the towns he'd been in. It was easier with the snow region - being there were so few towns. He did find a few places he didn't think he'd been to.

He thought it was silly, but Alida had him write his name properly on a paper. She proceeded to take the paper and hung it on her wall.

"Why did you hang that up." He asked.

"Dear, since you walked in this door, I've felt like you're my son." She pressed her lips together and glanced down at the floor. "My son may be no longer with us," she said and looked up at him with her eyes glistening. "But I feel like you're a part of my family now. When you leave this house, I hope that you still feel that you can come back here and talk, eat or just rest for a bit. I don't know where you'll go after tomorrow, but know that I love you and I wish for nothing but happiness in your future."

Alida moved over to him and held out her arms. Vilkas stood and embraced her. He could tell she was crying. She sniffled a few times. "Thank you, Alida. For everything."

"You're very welcome, my sweet boy."

Alida turned to look as Rochus stood and made his way over.

“As mamma said, if you need anything, don’t be afraid to stop in. I know I didn’t contribute, but mamma’s a better teacher than I am. And...I’m not one for sweet talk, but having you here has made this house feel like a home again. Thank you, Vilkas”

Vilkas raised his right arm and Alida held out her left arm. Rochus smiled and shook his head before he joined in the hug.

Vilkas sighed as he smiled. “Thank you both for helping me learn how to live.”

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