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

Chapter 24. "Viktor"

Shari returned from the kitchen with the tea. He moved the workbook to the side and held the cup in front of him. Shari walked onto the bed, held her cup in one hand and her other hand in front of her legs and began to sit. She folded her legs and crossed her ankles. She pulled at her skirt to fill the void between her body and feet. She took a sip of her drink and held it between her hands. She stared at him patiently.

"My name is Darijus. Or...Viktor...Vilkas. I've mostly used 'Viktor' throughout my life. I don't know what my last name is or was. I don't remember my father. I've never seen him. My mother just told me that the last words she ever heard from him were telling her to run."

Vilkas paused and took a sip of the tea. It tasted sweet with a mild herbal taste and a clean finish. It had a slight green color to it. Even the smell had a faint herbal odor to it. He could definitely pick out the honey she added to it.

"She ran. She told me she ran as fast as she could. She collapsed with exhaustion because I was on the way. She said she held me and made her smile for hours. The next memory I have was years later. My mother had made me a grass-stuffed doll. She used various feral pelts to make the body and buttons for eyes. I called it a puppy. I'm not sure why. I don't think it even looked like one." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Anyway, I remember we were in a large city. I remember playing with it when she picked me up and ran. I cried and cried. She finally set me down and told me that we couldn't go back because the bad guys were there."

"Darijus," Shari said as she leaned in and blinked several times. "About how old were you at the time?"

He looked inside of his cup and thought. "I'm not sure. Maybe...around Socorro's age. That's about how big everything seemed to me."

"Sweetie," she sat upright and closed her eyes. She appeared to think for a moment. She finally opened her eyes and looked at him questionably. "I could be wrong," she murmured. She chewed on her lip as she looked around the room. She looked back at him. "Yeah. Sweetie, there was a village a few hours walk Norrrth...West?" She chewed on her lip a bit more. "I think North-West of Namal Lu. It

was leveled around thirty years ago. It stayed like that for about ten years. The group that wrecked it tried to overtake Namal Lu years after that. It was around that time that time my parents arrived there. Val...Valeska...hold on."

Shari unfolded her legs and slid from the bed. She set her cup on his tray and quickly moved out of the room. She ran through the house and out the front door.

Several minutes passed. It felt like ten passed. He was beginning to feel concerned after what felt like twenty. Some more time passed when Shari bolted into the house and into the room.

He looked over as she walked in the room. She was breathing rather hard. What caught his attention was the object in her hands. She held a very beat-up, crude doll. He held out his hand. Shari placed it in his hand and leaned over.

"Val found that when they arrived in Namal. Dad tried to get rid of it and mom told her she could keep it. Mom won. Val refused to let it go for years. She put it in storage when she became a teenager. It's been there ever since."

He turned it around in his hand. It was made of animal pelts. Long ago dried grass poked out from various holes in the stitching. The remaining eye was a small, round, black button. The head was round and seemed to be from a brown rabbit. The body was oblong and made of spotted rabbit. The back was softer and had black and white stripes. The stripes were mismatched around the middle as if made from two different hides. The legs and arms were thin and made of a different shade of brown rabbit. The ears were small lumps made from a white rabbit. The small, round, black dot and the line for the smile was faded and barely visible.

He brought it to his nose. It smelled musty and like food, dust, dried grass and faintly floral like Valeska. He pulled it away from his nose and looked at it again. It still seemed familiar.

"I don't know. It doesn't smell..."

His nose twitched. He brought the doll back up to his nose and pressed it in on the top of the head. He inhaled deep, then deeper as he closed his eyes. It was very faint. He missed it the first time. But it was there. He could feel his heart ache and tears streamed down his face. Shari began to rub his shoulder, then his head. For several minutes, he held the head of the doll tight against his nose as tear after tear fell from his eyes.

"Purple," he finally said.

Shari sniffled. "A flower?"

"Yeah. It grew in bunches. Like stalks. Several inches of small purple flowers."

Shari sniffled again. "I don't know, sweetie. I can ask Amy."

"I remember. She put some of them in the head. Whenever I hugged it, I could smell her. It was her favorite."

He felt Shari sit next to him and wrap her arms around his neck with her head on his shoulder. He closed his eyes and recalled several images of his mother. They sat like that for some time.

"Thank you...Shari," he finally whispered.

"Your welcome, swee...Darijus. I can't even begin to process this right now. 'Fate' sounds too cliché."

More time passed with him inhaling his mother's scent and Shari embracing him. The door of the house suddenly flew open.

"Shari?"

Someone ran into the room. They both looked over at their guest.

"Suck on a rats ass and drink its shit!" Valeska exclaimed with her hand over her mouth.

"Language!" Shari scolded. "Suck your own ass back out the door!"

"Don't make me hurt you, sis." Valeska left the room and came back. "Clean yourselves up," she said, holding out a washcloth to both of them.

Shari took hers as he placed the doll on the tray. He took the cloth and wiped his face, then handed it back.

"He's from, um, Chrus, Val," Shari said. "He lost it in Namal when he was around Socorro's age. They were there the day before mom and dad arrived."

"That's some fate shit right there," Valeska said after taking Shari's cloth.

"Call it what you will."

"I don't remember everything, but I remember it being cute. Well, charming. But the smell...wait. So, he's finally telling you, huh? Let me get Soco. He'd eat his tail to hear this."

"It's about past the 'kid-friendly' part," Vilkas stated.

"Damn. Well, I *should* head back. One of these days, I want to hear this story since sis snatched that book up like a mother protecting its..."

"Why aren't you gone yet?" Shari lashed out.

"Because, now I need some of this." Valeska reached around them both and grabbed his right shoulder, then squeezed.

"Dammit! I can't breathe with you smashing those boulders into me!"

"Aww, sis," Valeska mocked and made kissing noises.

Vilkas began to laugh, then regretted it as he grabbed his chest.

"See! You're hurting an injured man. If not, I *will* be."

Valeska let go and said, "Damn! My fault."

"No kidding, cow."

Vilkas saw Valeska bring her second finger against her thumb and flicked the end of Shari's nose. Shari yipped as she covered her nose. Vilkas tried his best to not laugh. It hurt too much.

"Truce?"

"Truce."

"Well, you can have it back. It's just wasting away in storage. Sis and Soco...okay I kind of forgot about it. But, it *is* yours."

"Thank you," Vilkas said.

Valeska leaned over and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Sooo telling," Shari muttered, glaring at Valeska.

Valeska pulled back and hovered in front of Shari's face. "Then it's my turn," she hissed with an evil grin.

"Sooo not telling," she muttered as she looked defeated.

Valeska kissed Shari's cheek and stood upright. Shari glared at her as she wiped her cheek.

"Well, old man's probably losing his mind without me. I'm heading back. And," she said and leaned back in front of Shari. "Daddy put the flowers on the bar and brags

that the 'village hero' gave them to him, but I didn't tell you that," Valeska whispered to Vilkas and winked. She stood upright again. "Later."

"Later, Val."

"Bye."

Valeska left the house. Vilkas realized that Shari still had her right arm around his neck. She was still very close. Still pressing against him. He looked over at the tray as his heart fluttered and heat began to rise within him.

"She's something else. I think that pub warped her brain."

"Y-yeah."

Shari leaned in and kissed his cheek, then stood. "That's to get her germs off you. Nothing more," she said and walked around the bed. She stepped up and resumed her place at the foot of the bed. "Shall we continue?" She asked as she reached for her tea.

"Y-yeah," he said, his heart racing.

He took a drink of his tea and did some of his breathing exercises.

"Yeah. Sorry about that. She can get carried away."

"It's fine." He closed his eyes and did a few more breaths to collect his thoughts. "The next part's a little fuzzy. For the longest time, I suppressed it - passed it off as her playing a game without me." He gripped his cup tightly as the image came into his head. "But, what I thought was playing was something else. I just remembered her swinging from a rope like a rope swing and the humans pushing her. That's when I was taken away."

He was quiet for several moments. His hand trembled causing the cup to scrape against the tray. Shari sniffled and he could feel her shift several times.

"That day, we were walking towards a village. I remember looking over at mother. She was still beautiful. She still smiled when she looked at me. But, looking back, she was losing the light in her eyes. Like she hadn't slept in days. Her clothes were so tattered that they barely covered anything. I could see nearly every bone poking through her fur. I didn't know what was happening to her. I can't remember the last time she ate anything, but she always made sure I ate. I remember her telling me that she was going to look for work in the village."

He opened his eyes as Shari set her cup on the tray and moved next to him. Her eyes were full of tears and her cheek fur was ruffled from wiping them. She wrapped her

left arm behind his back and stroked his neck and the back of his head with her left hand. She leaned her head on his shoulder and placed her hand on his forearm - gently stroking it with her thumb.

"I think I know where this is going. I'm ready for it," she whispered and sniffled.

He felt his heart ache seeing and hearing her like this. He looked over at the tray and composed himself.

"As we neared the village, a group of men surrounded us. I don't remember anything they said, but mother told me that everything was going to be okay from now on and to be strong for her." He closed his eyes as the events unfolded in his head. "She screamed as someone behind her wrapped a rope around her neck. She kept screaming and screaming even though her voice was so weak. They lifted her up. She stopped screaming. I just...stood there...watching her struggle as they laughed and laughed."

He felt the anger, sadness and frustration building within him. His whole body shook as he watched her swinging from the tree. Helpless.

"They were...stabbing her...with spears...causing her body to swing. Just...laughing."

Shari carefully wrapped her right arm around his waist and cried into his shoulder. He shed his own tears, but he felt more hatred than sadness.

"I'm so sorry you had to see that," Shari choked out. "Nothing I say will change that. Even if..." She was quiet, then sniffled. "I just need to stay like this for a minute. I hope you don't mind."

Again he composed himself to continue. "I...one of them came over and told me I would see her again soon, but that I had to follow him until then. I never did. I was taken into a large building - like a farm stable - and placed into a cage without food or water. Several days later, people came in and took me out. I was chained to the back of a carriage and walked for a day or so until we arrived at a large house. I was given food and water. It wasn't much, but that's how it was for a couple of years. I was forced to clean the house and tend to the lawn and landscaping with several others. They weren't evil, I suppose. The last I saw of them, we packed their carriage and were on our way somewhere. The carriage was surrounded and the master and lady were pulled out, then killed. The two of us that were with them were bound and dragged behind feral horses to a mine."

Shari pulled away from his shoulder and traced the scarring. "And that's when this happened, huh?"

He looked over at her. "Yeah. I can't recall what they were mining because I was there to move rocks and clean the debris."

"This feels like something you read or hear in stories. This doesn't seem real. I'm just...at a loss for words. This is so surreal. I can't even begin to list all of the emotions I'm feeling right now. If you weren't in so much pain right now, I'd be stuck to you and hugging you for the rest of the day. I'd squeeze until my arms gave out. I just want to find these people and..."

"Shari, that's enough," he said calmly.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were filled with grief.

"It's okay. I may have been born and grew up on the run. I may have watched my mother die. I may have been enslaved for almost a decade. But, by how much longer was I the one that placed others in those situations?" He lightly sighed and looked at the tray. "I don't deserve pity. I don't deserve *this*." He was quiet for a moment. "If everyone in the village heard this, then read that book, which would happen first? Would I be pitied? Or would I be beheaded? I'm certain it'd be that latter."

"Sometimes it's not about what *was* done, but what *is* done. It may be hypocritical to say that we accept you for saving us while the blood of so many are on your hands, but as long as you don't return to that way of living, all can be forgiven with time. I'm sure I've said this before, but I don't know who you *were*. I know who you *are*."

He sighed and closed his eyes. He looked over at her. "It's strange you saying that. Alida said the same thing."

Shari smiled warmly. "I told you she's a wise woman."

It didn't seem right, but he smiled as well. "I suppose I'll just accept that, then."

She smiled a bit wider. "Now that you understand that," she said and placed her head back on his shoulder and her hand on his forearm, "Continue."

He looked back at the tray and drank some of the tea. "You know what happened at the end of the mining days. After waking up and throwing up from eating the mushroom, I wandered around. I ate berries and mushrooms like the first that I found. One day, I heard a hissing sound. I followed it until I came to the edge of the forest. I discovered a waterfall with a cabin next to the river it spilled into. I ran inside to find it empty. I remember eating a loaf of bread that was on the table and passing out in the bed. When I came to, a large man was sitting at the table. He just stared at me. I smelled the scent of fresh meat he'd hung by the door. He was a tiger breed about the size of your father. Not stout, but muscular. Intimidating."

"I dare you to call my father 'stout'," she said and giggled.

"I never went looking for fights unless I'm paid to."

"You're no fun," she grumbled.

"I still don't know what *normal* fun is, to be honest." He took a sip of his tea.

"Someday. You need to heal first," she said and sipped on her tea.

"I don't remember what he said to me. He never told me his name, either. I just remember him giving me a dagger - much like yours - and training me to use it. After about a week, he said that I had to provide my share of food. He trained me to use my ears, eyes, and nose to track ferals and other food. He taught me vital points to kill or maim. For about a year, he trained my mind and body for killing, stealth and survival. He gave me some clothing and food and told me to follow the river. That's where I started my mercenary work.

Everyone viewed me as useless because of my arm. I began work as a pack boy for hunting parties. I joined a few caravans to load and unload the merchandise. I was saving my money as best I could to afford a shield. Because it would have to be custom-made, it was going to be expensive. As I said, many of the scars were from before I could get one or times where I wasn't able to equip it. I was frustrated with nobody taking me seriously. One of the merchants I assisted said if I really wanted to change people's minds that I'd have to enter a tournament.

I used all of my coin to enter. I didn't have a choice but to win. I gained many scars on my arm and I lost a lot of blood, but I won the tournament. Many people called me the 'victor'. I wasn't sure what that meant. I thought they assumed that was my name. That was when I stopped calling myself Darijus."

"So that's where that came from. I can see how that makes sense now."

"The prize money allowed me to get my first shield. Treatment wouldn't have left me with enough coin if I received it. Instead, I applied the medicine my teacher gave me to my wounds. Many people approached me wanting to know where I learned to fight how I did. A few even wanted to pay me for my story. Many called me 'feral' with how my movements seemed out of instinct. Others called me 'beast' with how ruthless I was and how I didn't speak many words to anyone."

"I wonder if that's where your stalker came from. The book begins with this exact story."

"I guess I don't need to go on then."

Shari pulled away from his shoulder. "No. You can keep going."

He looked over at her. She did seem genuinely interested. "That's part of the problem. I don't remember much after that. Bits and pieces of scattered memories. I can't say where I've been or when." He stared at her expecting eyes. "Where does that book end, by the way?"

"Aww. I hate ruining the ends of books, but I suppose I already know it," she said disappointingly with a matching expression.

"I'm just curious as to when they stopped following me."

Shari moved to the end of the bed and grabbed the book. She flipped to the end of the book. She turned back page after page.

"This is all the author's thoughts." She turned and turned, then started using her finger to scan through the words. "It says he followed the men out of the town. I assume this is referring to Orinon. He watched the fight. Socorro might get a kick out of the fact he's mentioned in a book, the little sneak." Shari shivered and looked over at him. "I just got goosebumps. He watched you collapse in the house." She shivered again and looked back to the book. "It appears he assumed you were dead." A sly grin spread across her lips. "He doesn't know me very well. Heh heh heh." She closed the book and looked at the cover. "I don't know if we'd be able to find this guy. I'll ask around Orinon next time I'm there."

"Maybe that's not a good idea," he said and looked at the tray. "I liked it better when I didn't know someone was following me around."

"I can understand that. You're going to be mobbed anytime you walk out the door. I'm sure the only reason we don't get visitors is because they know you're healing. Speaking of," she said and returned by his side. "Maybe just point out some things. Like where or how you got certain scars? I don't know. I want to hear more from you and not the book, but I can understand you suppressing that stuff."

He thought for a moment. He was distracted by Shari. She was pressed against him. She had resumed stroking his neck and head. She also seemed to be petting his arm. She seemed to be staring at him. If it didn't make his heart ache and cause him to blush, he would look back at her.

"Well," he said and pointed under the bandaging to the left side of his chest. "This was from an attack while I was bathing. They had quite a bit of coin on them. That's usually the case when someone is hired to kill me."

"That had to have been especially painful. My nip-...I just can't imagine the sensitive tissue being cut like that."

"It didn't feel good. I remember that much." He pointed to his muzzle by the fresh scarring. "I'm sure you saw the other scars here."

"It looked like you had a fight with a porcupine."

"Spiked mace. It looked like a feral feline's tongue with how many small spikes were on it. When it wasn't stuck in my face, it was stuck in my shield." He pointed to his back. "Another assassin, I think. No...actually, that was during a battle between countries. There were so many people that I wasn't able to pay attention to what was behind me. I don't think they were very skilled with their great sword. Left quite a mark so at least it was sharp, I suppose." He brought his hand back down by his leg. "The rest are so many that I couldn't say where they came from. Defense mostly. I told you the story about the tooth and claws. I think I remember telling you about the ear. A shield bash that nearly knocked me out. I saw darkness and floating lights for a bit. I felt paralyzed."

"We call it a 'concussion'. It's cause isn't conclusive. We just know it's from blows to the head. Our knowledge of the brain is limited. We tend to stay away from matters under the skull. We don't have the technology. Experimenting on sentient creatures is taboo. Ferals can't speak so trial and error isn't possible when operating and expecting results."

"What caused the scars on my neck," he asked, still too afraid to look at her.

"That was..." He glanced over and saw her struggling. "It's complicated," she said and looked at him. "It was an experiment, honestly. I could have killed you or left you brain dead." She looked away from him. "I knew you were low on blood. I checked your wounds to make sure none of them were near arteries. Thankfully none were. I was very sloppy sewing them up, but I didn't have time to fuss over them. I cut open your neck to get to the artery going to your brain. I kinda, sorta...botched the first attempt by using a nutrient solution in the vein and forcing your heart to beat. It would only replace so much of your blood before you would, essentially, drown because of it. That's when I tried using a needle and a tube to create a link between you a-and...and me."

She seemed embarrassed by saying that. He could feel her hand slightly shaking on his neck.

"Without enough blood, your heart won't beat on its own. Without blood going to your brain, it can cause permanent damage within an hour or so. I needed to make sure it was going there first. *Forcing* it to go there. I pressed on your chest with one hand while my racing heart was shoving blood into you. I nearly passed out when you finally took a breath. I had to act fast to remove the needle from your neck and my arm so I could reinflate your lung. I made sure your artery wasn't leaking and did another lazy sewing job. I was at my limit. After removing the solution feed and sewing that back up, I devoured some fruit and cookies and passed out in my bed. I kept you sedated with a proper nutrient feed over the next few days. I opened you up after that to check your organs to make sure they were healthy. Then, I did what I could to repair all of the

damage and sew you up properly. After that, I stayed with you to make sure you were okay. I'm thankful that your blood didn't reject mine or that would have been a problem of its own. And *then*, after all that trouble, you thanked me by choking me."

She looked at him and appeared serious. He was about to apologize when she chuckled. "I'm kidding. If I knew then what I do now, I would've strapped you down first. I didn't expect you to swing first and ask questions later." She looked away again. "I suppose even that was naive. I just knew you saved the town, but I wanted to be cautious so I bound your hands and feet. Maybe that wasn't a good idea. I don't know."

"You are either very quiet or talk a lot when you're tense, I've noticed."

She looked at him with a toothy, uneasy smile. "Yeah. Tense, anxious or whatever you want to call it."

He smiled warmly at her. "Just...relax."

She sneered at him. "Can we just not reference that again, pervert."

He gave her his own toothy, uneasy smile. "Sorry." He looked over at the booklet. "What did you mean when you wrote this? I have the definition but I'm not sure I understand the usage."

She seemed to be embarrassed as she looked away from him. "Darius, people do many things to protect themselves." She looked back at him. "People lie. People attack. People defend. People shy away. People put on a mask to hide their true feelings. Just know that I'm sorry for treating you like that. I don't hate you." He saw her eyes shift as if she wasn't looking at him. "I want to continue our friendship as if it never happened, Vilkas." Her eyes shifted back to him and she smiled.

He smiled back. She placed her head against his shoulder, but her hands stopped moving. He looked back at the word she wrote on the booklet. "What was that about? Calling me by both names...are you still wearing the mask, Shari?" He thought as he stared at the word.

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