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

Chapter 32. “Darijus”

Vilkas’ eyes went wide as his heart relocated to his stomach. He reached up and held Amy’s head against his shoulder.

“Shari!” He called out and looked around.

“Darijus!” Shari called out. “Excuse me.”

Shari pushed her way through the crowd. She emerged as the last set of people parted. She looked from Amy to him. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she paused. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around both of them and pressed her head into his other shoulder.

“Shari, who’s Darijus?” Amy asked.

“Not now, sweetie,” Shari said and rubbed Amy’s back.

“How much time do we have?” Vilkas asked.

“A merchant going to Namal Lu said they saw the Säuberung about a day out and heading this way.”

“Säuberung? How many?”

“They guessed around fifty. Supposedly it stands for “purge” or “cleansing”. They saw their emblem on some of the troops’ clothing and hurried to Namal.”

“Shit,” he breathed out.

“Vilkas!” Ularn called over.

Shari stepped back and tugged on Amy’s arm.

"I'm scared, Shari," Amy sobbed and clung to him tighter.

"So am I, sweetie, but...come with me."

Amy loosened her grip and stepped over to Shari. She slapped her arms around Shari and began to cry. Vilkas strangled his crutch causing it to creak beneath his hand. He made his way over to Ularn. Next to him was a leopard man about Seppo's size.

"Vilkas, this is Rikard. Rikard, Vilkas," Ularn said as he motioned between the two.

"Have I seen you somewhere?" Rikard asked, his deep voice having a bit of a nasally sound to it.

"Under the circumstances, let's hope it's the first and the last." Vilkas looked over the group. "Mercs?"

"Yeah. Someone named "Shari" from here put up a notice with some money paid upon arrival."

Vilkas glared at him. "You'll be sticking around afterwards, yes?"

Rikard laughed a bit more than necessary. He cut off his laugh and stepped quickly into Vilkas' face - close enough for Vilkas to smell the alcohol on his breath and see the small scars scattered across his muzzle.

"What'll you do if we don't, crutches?" Rikard mocked.

Vilkas stood up straight and dropped the crutches to his side. He pressed his nose into Rikard's and stared into his eyes with a killing intent.

"Now that I have your scent, I'll use this "feral" nose to track you down. Not just during the day. I will torment you in your sleep. Think you can run through four cities in a night? When I find you, I won't kill you at first. No. I'll carefully cut off your fur. I'd hate to ruin a good winter coat. I know how to find the organ pushers. If I can't find one of those, there's always a gourmet. Of course the organs have to be fresh. I'm not very graceful so it might get a little sloppy removing them while you squirm and sob like a bitch. And if you make too much noise, I'll pull out your intestine and feed it down your throat. Fill them with sand and tie off the ends if they don't go down easy. I'll make sure you don't die until I'm satisfied. I know a damn good doctor that knows ways of keeping someone alive even without blood."

"Please don't include me in your threats!" Shari called over.

Rikard looked from Vilkas to Shari and back. "*That* Shari," he simply said and backed away. "If it's for Shari, I guarantee these guys came to fight."

"Good. I'd hate for," Vilkas said and grabbed his head as he began to sway. "For..."

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My eyes opened to see a familiar ceiling. I heard a soft snoring next to me. I looked over to see Shari's sleeping face. It was something I could stare at forever. Her nostrils slowly caved in and quickly flared out with each breath. I reached over and swept the hair from over her eye. She groaned and readjusted her head against the pillow.

My ear picked up a voice coming from outside. It was strange being that nobody should have been awake at this time. I carefully slid away from Shari and swiveled to place my feet on the floor. I looked around, but I didn't see my crutches anywhere. I looked down at my left leg. I reached down and ran my hand over the fully-furred, scarless leg. I placed some weight on it. It felt fine. I stood from the bed and made my way to the dining area. I grabbed the handle to the door and stepped through.

My eyes adjusted to see that I was standing in the entrance of the pub. It was full of people of all races and genders. I followed the sound of the voice to the person sitting at the bar with a tall, clear glass containing a dark liquid. The voice stopped as the person met my eyes.

"You're back," the winged wolf said and took a drink from the glass. He placed the glass down and turned back. "I was just telling these guys," he said, then paused as he tilted his head and glanced at the ceiling. "Well, I guess myself," he continued, then looked at me again. "That you were about to be a hero," he said, then leaned back as he held his hands - palm out as if surrendering - up and went on, "Sorry...*badass* again." He lowered his hands and took another drink.

He sighed and cleared his throat. "I should introduce you." He pointed at me with his right hand - palm up. "Everyone, this is Darijus...er, Vilkas...Viktor or whatever."

All heads turned my way. They all waved and in unison said, "Hi Darijus."

The wolf held his hand to his chest. "I'm Mykol. You should know that I'm not really the," he said and held his hands up to the side, then waved the first two fingers on each side, "*original*." He lowered his hands and went on. "The true number one chose me to speak for him. He's a bit of an introvert with low self-esteem. Truth be told, I'm the only one that's met him. But, anyway, the point is that you are *technically* number eight. The original has the final say in matters, but otherwise stays out of things. So I'm the acting number one."

I wasn't entirely sure what he meant or what he was saying. According to what he told me before, I was supposed to know. Maybe the memories would come to me soon so I could make sense of all this.

He pointed at a male human. "That's Daniel. He's number two." He pointed at a bull. "That's Fin. Three." He pointed at the female lizard. "That's Brooke. Four." He pointed at the female cheetah. "That's - and I'm going to fuck this up..." He parted his lips while making a rolling 'R', growl-like sound. "Rrrah...she...ah. Spelled: Arr, ay, zee, eye, why, ay. Lovely name. Hard as hell to say. She's five." He pointed to the male ferret. "And that's Rius. Six." He lowered his hand. "The rest are loved ones with a strong connection to the ones I mentioned, be they love-love or family-love."

He turned for another drink. He set the glass down and sighed. "You probably think I'm fucking crazy when I'm talking to the others when they're all a part of me, but," he said and snapped his fingers. Everyone in the room except him disappeared. "This gets pretty fucking lonely. Since myself and the original are essentially one and the same..."

I squeezed my eyes shut and reopened them in disbelief. Though, I shouldn't be surprised by anything in this dream space or whatever it was.

He took a drink as the crowd faded back into existence, then looked at me. "Something *is* wrong with you, but I won't know what it is until you officially join us. We're all rooting for you and your doctor friend. Hopefully she can figure out what's going on with you after the final fight." He leaned forward and held up the back of his left hand on the right side of his muzzle. "By the way...*nice*," he quietly said and nodded his head.

The female gazelle scoffed and glared at him. I thought it was strange that she had horns. The female gazelles with the black stripes I've seen didn't have them. By the looks of it, they were docked and sharpened.

"You're going to say that while *I'm* sitting next to you?" She asked with annoyance.

"Or me. What kind of example are you setting for your son?" The female cheetah sitting on the other side of him asked.

The small boy sitting next to her looked nearly furless. Looking closer, he had fur, but it was really short and very sparse. It was hard to make out the similar markings and coloring like his mother's.

"Ever the boorish, belligerent imbecile," the boy stated with his own glare.

The crowd laughed while Mykol closed his eyes, let out his breath and lowered his hand with a defeated look.

"I don't know what any of that meant," I said, looking at the boy.

"You'll get along well with *that* one," the boy said flatly as he looked from me and glanced at Mykol.

"Aaa-neeee-waaay," Mykol said as the crowd quieted down. He looked at me very seriously. "Good luck out there. Go back to her and cherish your time together." He glanced over to the gazelle. "You never know when your last moment together will be." He looked back at me and smiled. "Shoo!" He exclaimed and motioned at me.

I nodded and turned around to leave. Everyone said their goodbyes as I walked back into Shari's house. I stared at her sleeping face for a while before climbing back into the bed with her. I kissed her and cuddled up close to her.

"I love you," I said and closed my eyes.

#####

Pain. So much pain. His head felt like it was being crushed. The squealing in his ear was louder than usual. Soft sobs could be heard next to him. He tried to open his eyes. The light was blinding. He groaned as he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Darijus!" Shari yelled.

He winced as her voice reverberated in his head. He felt her shift next to him.

“Sorry,” she said softly as she rubbed his chest. She sniffled and moved around again. “Are you okay now?”

“Other than the ringing in my ears being loud, the light being bright and my head feeling like it’s in a vice, I’m okay,” he painfully said.

“I’ll get a wet cloth. Maybe that’ll help. I can’t give you any pain medication for a bit.”

“That’s fine.”

Shari moved from the bed and left the room. Within a minute, he felt her press a damp cloth to his forehead. He reached up and moved it down to cover his eyes.

“What happened?”

“You were talking tough to the mercenaries I hired and just...collapsed.”

He heard something tap the floor, then felt her hands envelop his. She squeezed his hand and kissed it several times.

“What caused it?”

He felt her rub her muzzle against his fingers. “I don’t know.”

“It happened once before, too. Seppo woke me up before our dinner date.”

“Has it happened before that?”

He rocked his head. “No.”

“Then I’m stumped. I don’t know what causes headaches, abdominal pain, memory issues, fatigue and fainting. Maybe some disease, but you haven’t come in contact with anything that would cause it. If it was a long-term disease, you would have had these symptoms before. The pains with fatigue could be the diet and limited movement for months. It’s the memory and fainting issues that are throwing me off.”

“Well, we do have more important things to worry about. We can worry about all that after we defend the village.”

Shari sniffled with a squeak. "I know," she sobbed. "But I'm worried about you *now*."

He squeezed her hand. "Then let's stay close until then."

"I love you so much," she whispered.

"I love you just as much," he whispered back.

Shari stayed like that for a while. Whenever she sniffled, he would squeeze her hand. When the sniffing stopped, she let go of his hand and moved around the bed to crawl in beside him. They held each other for a couple of hours.

Shari eventually got up and left the room. She came back to give him a shot of the pain medication. The damp cloth and the fresh surge of relief made the pain in his head diminish. She left the room and began to make noise in the kitchen. He collected his energy and made his way out into the dining area - despite her protest.

Dinner was delicious as always. The events of his seemingly real dreams kept bothering him. He felt it was time to bring it up.

"Shari," he said and set down his mug from a drink.

He looked over at her to see her swallow. Her face looked ragged. Her fur was matted to her face away from her muzzle from wiping her eyes. It pained him to see her like that. He wondered if it was a good time. He decided to go for it anyway.

"What are your thoughts on reincarnation?" He asked, his tone even.

She looked a bit confused. "Like, do I believe in some higher power, do I believe we have souls that transfer to other bodies in the future or something like that?"

"Yeah. The second one."

She appeared to think for a moment. "I'm not sure. Scientifically speaking it's ridiculous. Realistically speaking it's also ridiculous. There's no legitimate record of it ever happening. I sure don't remember living a past life."

He looked away for a moment to try and collect his thoughts with that information.

"Are you telling me," she began, but didn't finish.

He looked over at her. She had a calculating look about her. He looked away again.

"I've...been having...dreams." His voice was quiet and timid. "Or...they seem like dreams, but they're very...realistic."

"You mean like a lucid dream? Where you walk, talk and can act like you are now?"

He glanced over at her and nodded, then glanced back at the table. He took a breath and looked up at her.

"In them, a wolf with wings and strange eyes that can change into a human says that I'm his seventh reincarnation."

Shari's head tilted to the side. Her eyes become more narrow. Vilkas let out his breath in a huff as he looked back at his empty plate.

"I sound stupid. Don't I?" He asked, sounding defeated.

"Go on."

He glanced back at her quickly. He took in another breath as he stared at his plate.

"He...*claims*...that I'm the last. I met the previous five versions, too. Male. Female. Human. Beast. Reptile. He said that there's another - the original - that doesn't like to be seen. Or something. He says that despite the others, he's alone. He's trying...and, I guess, failing...to have a version go through life without hardship. A "perfect" life. Tragedies seemed to happen early or late in their lives. He was hoping that I'd be the one to break the cycle. But...I guess I've failed, too."

"This sounds like shit, you know," Shari said bluntly.

"Forget I mentioned it then," he said and stood to go lay back down.

"Wait-wait-wait," she blurted.

He stood holding the crutches under his arms. Shari sighed deeply.

"I'm sorry. That was extremely rude of me, but you have to see that from my vantage, right?"

He dropped his head. "No. You're right. It's shit." He brought the crutches forward.

"Sit," she commanded.

He hovered in place.

"Please," she said more politely.

He hesitated.

"I *want* to understand what you're saying. But, you just handed me the instructions for brain surgery that doesn't kill someone. I need to process it first before I dive in."

He lifted his head.

"I love you. Please...don't walk away until we come to an understanding."

He brought the crutches back by his feet. He slowly untucked them and placed them against the wall before hopping over and sitting. He took a breath and let it out slowly while looking at the table. He looked up at her.

"I was supposed to have all their memories to guide me through life. Mother always said I was a smart boy. Even with all of their memories...watching her die like that," he said and began to choke up.

She reached her hands over with a compassionate look. He felt the strain in his chest as he breathed in. It worked its way up his neck and held in his throat. He lifted his arm up and placed his hand in hers.

"I just...forgot. But, the headaches - the sharp pains in my head you saw that time - were me remembering parts of them. Strange places. Strange objects."

He felt her hand tremble. He looked up at her wide-eyed face.

"That's...how..."

He nodded. "Yeah. The broccoli. Cleaning the house. Cleaning the tub. Doing the dishes. Writing a foreign language. Making love to you, even though I was still nervous. I think it explains why I learn things so easily."

"You lost me at "winged wolf with strange eyes that can transform into a human." You brought me back with that." She squeezed his hand. "It's not that you learned it all at once. I think it was slowly coming back to you. You didn't know how to read or write when you came here. Within weeks, you were speaking more fluently, smarter and more often. Even though you knew things, you were still experiencing most of them for the first time. So, of course you'd still be or feel a little awkward. And, with as much as it hurt, leaving the night we were found in bed together was the smart move. Staying at the pub would have been torture. I know you couldn't stay here or there. Some of my questions about you can be answered with that explanation." She chuckled. "It's still ridiculous, but I suppose anything's possible."

She got up from the table and moved over to him. She let go of his hand and gave him a hug. "Let's hold that thought until after we survive tomorrow. I have sooo many questions and I want to hear all about these dreams. Right now, I just want to be with you and hold you."

He smiled. "I can accommodate that request."

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After spending the night in each other's arms, it was the day of reckoning. Breakfast had a somber feel to it. Shari was quiet. Vilkas wasn't sure how to talk her out of her funk. All he could think of was to pay attention to her, touch her if she walked by and hold her before they walked out the door.

The only noise in town was people moving around. The shops were closed. Seppo was with Ular in the village square passing out weapons and armor. Vilkas could see a shop owner stationed at the other three entrances to warn the visitors. Everyone had a similar look to them as Shari did. They were lamenting the day.

Ular quietly passed Vilkas a set of leather armor. He moved aside and joined Shari by Ular's shop. He helped her into her armor and strapped her in. She helped him with his armor and shield, then fastened his belt around his waist.

She looked up at him as she placed her fingers between him and the leather to check the snugness. Her eyes were watering and she seemed on the verge of breaking

down in front of him. He gave her the best smile he could muster, then brought her in for a hug. He rubbed his muzzle against the top of her head.

"It's going to be okay. We're all going to be okay. We trained for this day. We could train as long as a year and never be ready for this day. We have to do what we must the best we know how," he said, reassuringly.

"I know," she sobbed. "Hold me and share your resolve. I'm about to piss myself, I'm so scared."

"Everyone! Gather 'round!" Ularn shouted.

The crowd slowly made their way into a circle around him. Vilkas continued to hold Shari where they stood. Ularn looked over the trembling mass. He took in a breath and let it out slowly.

"I know we're all scared...frightened...or worse." Ularn paused and looked around. "We *have* to stay strong. We *have* to stick together. We *have* to defend our homes." He looked around again. "We *cannot* let these people come into our village and do whatever they want! We..."

The villagers collectively jerked and looked over toward the sound of the warning bell ringing out. The shrill '*dinging*' rang throughout and echoed over the village. Vilkas let go of Shari and used his crutches to make his way to the Southern street. The ringing stopped save for the residual echoing. Amy came running towards him.

He stood between the ruined shops that were nothing but floorboards now. He turned around and looked at the villagers. He took a breath and let it out slowly. He stood on his right foot and collected the crutches in his left hand.

"Your families are depending on you to ensure their safety. Would you rather look upon their proud faces...or that of disappointment? Don't get yourselves killed. Come back safely. We don't have to be heroes," he said and trailed off as a smile hijacked his lips. "But, it feels damn good."

He threw the crutches off to the side and drew his sword. He turned around and looked at Amy. A grin unbecoming of her gentle nature spread across her lips. She drew her daggers and turned around.

"Let's just kick their asses," she said confidently.

The villagers came up beside him. Shari grabbed Vilkas' arm. He looked over at her as her hand snuck behind his head to pull their muzzles together in a strong kiss. A loud '*smooch*' ended the meeting. She looked at him - her expression sharing Amy's confidence.

Vilkas looked down the road. "We all know what we need to do. For Dalry," he said and gripped his sword tighter.

He walked behind Amy as the archers split off and ran to their assigned stations. The numbness in his leg was making it difficult to walk, but the rise in adrenaline was compensating for it. He hoped nothing would happen to it. Shari didn't protest so it must be fine.

The Säuberung were at the base of the small hill leading to Namal Lu. The villagers made it to the clearing behind the barricade. Rikard and the mercenaries stepped forward. Vilkas could see that most of the enemies' weapons were new. They sure didn't look like fighters.

His eyes focused on the one riding a feral horse. He was dressed much like the one he took out when he arrived in Dalry. The sight of this one made his blood boil a little hotter. He looked familiar.

"How cute," the man on the horse called over. "Drop the act and I *might* let you live to work under me."

Vilkas looked over and made eye contact with Shari. She was peeking out from the other side of the house to his left. She nodded.

Vilkas looked back over at the intruders. "Fire!" He shouted.

Nocked arrows were sent flying at the group. Every shot hit. The recipients slowly fell to the ground. The remaining Säuberung troops hollered and charged. Another volley was sent at the advancing infantry. Half of the shots met their mark causing the enemies to fall. About forty troops remained.

The surging troops began to feather out towards the archers. The mercenaries and some of the villagers followed a pursuit angle to intercept them. Vilkas and the remaining held strong. More arrows were sent out. More troops fell.

The Säuberung made it to the barricade. The defense party advanced to keep them from making it further into town. Battle cries and clanging steel could be heard throughout the battlefield.

Vilkas stopped a sword with his shield and plunged his sword into a gut. His eyes caught a swirl of black and white. Amy blocked a sword with the parrying dagger, pirouetted to send the sword away from her and stabbed the person in the neck. He avoided a spear aimed for his face. He grunted and shoved his body and shield into the attacker. They shouted and reeled back. It was enough of an opening for Vilkas to catch the end of his blade across the enemy's neck.

A shrill cry was heard from his left. Vilkas saw a large Säuberung troop looming over a fallen Nir. An arrow met the shoulder of the man followed by a flash of brown that sank her dagger into his gut.

Vilkas exchanged steel with someone to his right. "This one isn't half bad," he thought as blow after blow was blocked. "Time for something different."

He flailed his right arm up and sent the blade over the head of the troop. He planted his left foot and sent his right into the side of the knee of the man. The man cried out as he slumped to the ground. Vilkas lunged and placed his blade into the gap where the armor was buckled at the side.

He quickly looked back over at Shari. Nir made it back to his feet and began to flee. Shari blocked blow after blow with her bow. Her bow snapped. She quickly raised up the two sides of the bow and caught the man's wrist with the string. She threw one end around and caught the broken wood. She wrenched down to send the blade into the ground and her knee into the face of the man. Blood spilled from his flattened nose as his head snapped back. They both fell to the ground. He lay motionless while Shari held her leg.

Vilkas was snapped back into the fight when one of the thugs hollered during a strike. He turned to avoid the blade. It just missed his head, but it landed along his arm and snapped one of the shield buckles free. He stepped forward as he squeezed his shoulder to trap the man's arm. He parted his muzzle and sank his teeth into the side of his neck. The man gurgled out a scream as Vilkas yanked his head back. He felt the flesh shift on top and the esophagus pop from his fangs on the bottom.

He glanced around as the man stuck in his fangs became limp. Most of the invaders were on the ground or began to flee. He felt a tinge of remorse at the sight of mercenaries and villagers lying lifeless on the ground or clutching body parts crying out

for help. Ularn was far to the right battling with a Säuberung troop. Seppo was moving around and saving the wounded. Vilkas loosened his jaw to send his kill to the ground.

“FAAAHHHK!” Vilkas yelled as something pierced his leg.

He looked down to see a bolt sticking out of his right thigh. His knees gave out and he fell back, landing on his rear. He looked up to see the man on the horse throw the crossbow to the side. The man grabbed something from his side. Vilkas reached over and pulled the bolt from his thigh, then threw the bolt away. He leaned to his right and pulled his right leg underneath him.

“SNAP!”

Vilkas felt something grab onto his left arm above the elbow. He looked over to see a braided leather rope snaring his arm. His widened eyes followed it to the hand of the man on the horse. The horse whinnied as it reared up and turned to the right. He felt searing pain and heard a loud “pop” as he was jerked forward and began to be dragged.

“DARIJUS!” He heard Shari shriek.

“VILKAS!” Amy shrieked just after.

Vilkas tried to look to make sure they were safe, but couldn’t locate either of them. He suddenly stopped and the horse whinnied again. He caught a glimpse of black as it rebounded away from the taut whip. The line slacked just enough for him to jerk his body away from the confines of the whip. It slid free from his arm and left him lying on his back. He rocked his head back to see a sword come down and slash through leather and open up Amy’s shoulder and part of her chest. Amy screamed and covered the wound with her hand as she fell to the ground.

“NO! AMY!” Shari shrieked.

“AMY!” Vilkas yelled as she writhed in pain.

“SNAP!”

“HOCK!” Shari yipped.

Vilkas rolled his head to see her hands go up to her neck where the whip found its new home.

“SHARI!” Vilkas yelled.

He got to his knees as he watched her captor reel her in by the whip.

“No dammit!” He cried as he watched her inch closer to the man’s horse.

The man laughed as Vilkas watched in vain.

“For a mutt, you’re not bad lookin’,” the man called out. “I don’t think I have one of your kind mounted on my wall. Your head will make a fine addition to my collection.”

“AAAHHH!” Vilkas screamed as he watched the man’s sword rise up. “I have to save her!” He thought. “But how? I can barely move.”

A flash of blue light filled his eyes. He felt an incredible surge of power rise within him. It felt like something shot out of his back by his shoulder blades.

“Save her,” a voice whispered in his head.

Vilkas yelled as his muscles tightened. His hand and foot claws dug through the grass and into the earth. He shoved against gravity and launched himself at the man on the horse. Something carried him at an incredibly fast speed. He saw the sword come down. He moved his arm over to block it.

The sword slashed across his left wrist and dug into his skin. The rhodonite bracelet snapped free. His body connected with the man’s. His foot claws dug into the flesh of the horse. His open maw snapped shut around the man’s face as the momentum sent him flying through the man and over the horse. The man cried out as Vilkas’ teeth slid across the bones of his face.

“KAH!” Vilkas coughed out as he landed on his back, the flesh he ripped free slipping from his fangs.

He took a breath and rolled onto his stomach. His eyes darted to one side. Shari was doubled over on her knees with a hand up to her neck as she coughed. Amy had gotten to her feet and was making her way over to Shari.

Vilkas’ eyes locked back onto his target. The man was covering his face as he made it to his knees. Vilkas felt his muscles bunch up again as his claws sank into the earth. He growled and launched himself forward. He tackled the man and shoved him to the ground. His left arm intercepted the man’s right arm. His right hand grabbed the

man's left arm and pinned it to the ground. He swatted away another attempt at a right-handed strike, then grabbed the man's arm and pinned that to the ground. Vilkas growled as he loomed over the man.

"You should have killed me at the mine," Vilkas spit.

He opened his maw and clamped his teeth down around the man's throat. The man yelled as blood pooled around Vilkas' teeth and splashed against his tongue. The man's cry turned to gurgling, then slowly faded.

He relaxed his jaw and lifted his head. He pushed off the ground and got to his feet. He stepped over the body and made his way over to Shari and Amy. Shari was tying off a length of fabric around Amy's shoulder.

"Keep your hand pressed into that as hard as you can," Shari said as she knotted the fabric again. "If you can, help the others. I'll meet everyone at my house."

"Thank you, Shari," Amy said through sobs, then hugged her as tears streamed down her face.

Shari turned to face him as he walked towards her. Her face twisted into a smile and she pulled away from Amy to run to him. He winced as her body slammed into his and her arms wrapped around him.

"Careful. I'm not so hot myself," Vilkas warned. "How's everyone else?"

"We lost some. Some are hurt pretty bad. I'll cry later. Right now, I'm just so happy we made it through this," Shari said with a wavering voice.

"Maybe if we had some more time to train...no," he said and shook his head. "Now's not the time to think like that. We overcame their numbers. We win today. For those that made it out alive *and* for those that sacrificed themselves to save the people they love."

"Yeah. You're right. Let's head back to my place. I'm going to be busy for a while."

Shari pulled back from him and raised her muzzle. He looked at her. They smiled at each other and kissed.

Shari moved to his left and pulled his arm over her shoulders. He gingerly stepped on both feet as they slowly moved back to the village.

“Are you hurt?” She asked softly.

“I think my shoulder went back in place. It’ll hurt for a week. I caught a bolt in my leg. I don’t think it’s serious, though.”

“Not hiding anything from me, are you?” She asked with a hint of disbelief.

He snickered. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Not going to tell me just how the hell you looked like you had wings growing out of your back...or your eyes seemed to glow blue...or, better yet, how your right arm was just fine for a minute there?” She asked, her tone drenched in skepticism.

He looked over at her. “No,” he said and looked back at the road in front of them. “I can’t claim to know what that was. I just...felt a surge of...*rage* when I saw you struggling against that guy.”

“Whatever it was, I’m glad it happened. I think I peed a little.”

He chuckled. “I might have, too. I don’t think I’ve ever moved that fast.”

“I’ll get you to your crutches, then...”

A stabbing pain shot through his head, his ear squealed sharply and he felt faint.

“Darijus? You okay over there?” Shari asked with a bit of concern.

“Y-...”

He couldn’t finish the words as his stomach clenched. His heart began to race. His vision began to blur and lights flickered everywhere. He felt a stabbing pain on both sides near his back. His left leg went completely numb. It felt like his body was tingling and his insides were convulsing. He felt his right leg shake and give out.

“Darijus!”