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

Chapter 4 "Food Is Enough"

He awoke and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He sat up and yawned as he scratched his chest. He blinked several times and looked around. He froze. "Something feels...off," he thought.

He brought his left arm up and looked at his wrist. "No ropes."

He looked down at his legs. There was a thin blanket covering them. "No straps."

He looked over to the right. "No Shari."

He reached up and grabbed his ear. He gave it a good tug. "That hurts so this must be real."

He rubbed his ear and smoothed out the back of his head. "Does that mean..."

He stopped his thought as his eyes met the sword and scabbard leaning up against the cabinet. Next to it was his pack.

"How did I sleep through all this? What the...?" He mentally questioned as he saw something on the cabinet.

He uncovered his legs and swung over the left side of the bed. He walked over to the cabinet and picked up the cloth object. It unrolled in his hand. "A tunic?" There was another roll that appeared to be trousers. It looked as if his belt was underneath them. "This is kind and all, but...now what?"

He looked around the room and back to the tunic. He pondered his next move as he folded and rolled the blanket. He set it at the foot of the bed and knelt down by his gear. He unbuckled his pack and poked around the contents. It was as he remembered from the last time he'd looked. He saw his coin purse inside. He picked it up by the rope

tie and noticed it was significantly lighter than he'd remembered. He didn't see the other one he acquired from the attempted mugging.

"I think I was mugged," he muttered as he felt the outside of the purse to confirm the empty inside. He sighed and dropped it back in the pack. He flipped the top over it and buckled it.

He stood and dressed. He unsheathed his sword and dropped it on the bed. He swung the belt around the tunic and buckled it, then adjusted the location of the scabbard. He grabbed the rope of his knapsack and slung it over his head to the shoulder. He sheathed the sword and gave the room a once-over. It seemed that was all of his belongings.

"I have a few thoughts on what to do," he thought. "I can't stay hiding here. I need to do something." He smoothed out the front of the tunic. "Maybe Shari and I can come up with something together." He walked over, left the room and closed the door. "It seems quiet in here."

He looked over and didn't see her at the table. He moved over to her bedroom door. He pressed his ear to it. He softly knocked and slowly opened the door. He stepped in the room and looked around. "She's not here."

He left her room and walked down the short hall. He carefully confirmed the drapes were drawn when he noticed something on the table top he couldn't see from the end of the hallway. There was a letter next to a cloth covered basket. A jar of what looked like honey and a spreading knife were next to it. He folded the note and placed it in his bag.

"Wish I could read," he thought and looked under the cloth.

Two of the rolls like they had for dinner were underneath. The smell of them was even better than before. He touched one and felt a little bit of heat emanate from within the crust. He left it uncovered and walked to the wash basin. He located his tankard next to the drinking water pail. He carefully poured some water in and found a seat at the table.

As he enjoyed his breakfast, his ears picked up some idle chatter close by.

"Thank you for traveling here, brother," a female said. "Most of the men are out at the sawmill. But we really need hands doing cleanup on the other half of town. Lunch and refreshments will be served in a few hours..."

He stopped listening when the voice became inaudible and finished eating. He covered the basket and placed his tankard in his pack. He walked around the table and to the door. He placed his hand on the handle.

"No," he thought as he stopped short of opening it. He thought about the way Socorro spoke of him. "I can't go into town like this. If Socorro's been telling stories about me, everyone will know what I look like." He backed away from the door and thought. He looked over at his thin arm. He reached around and brought it to his chest and wrung his hands together. He stopped and slowly brought the weak appendage down by his belt. After a moment, he hummed. "Maybe if I hide the obvious..."

He walked back into the medical room and located four strips of wood about the length of his forearm and enough cloth to wrap it and fashion a sling. It took some time but he managed to make it look authentic. He wrapped from his shoulder down to and around his hand, then hoisted the lower half up into a sling. With the wood wrapped inside around his upper and lower arm, it looked like they were bulkier than they were.

"If only I had something to hide this," he thought as he felt his broken ear. "I suppose I could wrap cloth around my head."

He grabbed another length of cloth. This one unfolded into a rather large square. It reminded him of some of the head dressings he wore in the desert. It took some time to fold and tie it properly since he'd already wrapped his other hand. It was mostly useless, but it did provide enough help to do tasks such as this. He felt ridiculous as he pressed his head into the cloth against the cot and brought the ends around. He pinched the ends together, then knelt down and managed to tie it with help from his teeth. He pulled the finished product over his head and shifted it a bit before it felt like it was in place and tight.

He made his way to the door and pressed his covered ear against the wood. He stepped over to the window and peered both directions. It seemed the coast was clear. He took the door handle in hand and paused. He glanced over his shoulder. "Thank you," he said and made his way outside.

He could see movement in the distance to the right. It looked as if the group of cleaners was on the other side of the town square. A scaffold was around the last house on the left before the main intersection. He didn't remember much of the layout, but it did seem familiar. He walked toward the middle of town.

"So far I don't see anyone that would recognize me," he thought as he walked. "I should have thought of..."

"Oh! Hello traveler."

He stopped and noticed he was standing just before the house that was being constructed. A man was walking toward him from the far end of that house.

"That voice," he thought.

The man with the young sounding voice stopped a respectable distance away. He looked to be half a head taller than Shari. He seemed to have a similar fur palette but with light brown arms and hands. His eyes were similar to Socorro's and his face was all caramel brown.

"Welcome to Dalry," he said cheerfully and extended his black ash stained right hand.

He looked down at the extended hand and back to the man's eyes. He watched as they widened and the man began to look embarrassed. "Ah...heh-heh," the man chuckled with embarrassment. "I didn't..."

"It's fine," he said calmly.

The man reclaimed his failed physical greeting and winced throughout his whole body.

"Rumor has it you need help," he said and tipped his nose up as he looked past the man. "Seems I hear correct."

"Ah...heh," the man said nervously. "Yeah. Um." The man appeared to sort through some thoughts as his eyes kept wandering toward the wrapped arm.

"I'm not useless," he stated and flexed his left arm out and up to his left, mimicking what he saw a muscleman performer do once. He brought his arm down and tucked his thumb behind the belt just above his left hip.

The man's eyes widened and he took a step back. "Ah...yeah, uh, no offense intended," he said and clasped his hands at his chest and slightly bowed. He adjusted his stance and clapped his hands together, then held them like that just away from his

torso and returned to his friendly expression. "Let's start over. Welcome to Dalry. My name is Nir. Pleased to have you."

"Yeah," he said calmly. "So this is Nir," he thought. "Socorro's father and Shari's...brother by marriage."

"Uh...uh-huh-hum," Nir stuttered. "Not to pry, but may I have your name?" He questioned with a squeaky voice.

He narrowed his eyes. "Crap," he thought. He searched back to the conversation he had with Shari.

Nir appeared to scan him as he was thinking. He kept looking at the bandaged arm.

"Vilkas," he finally said as they met eyes.

"Vilkas," Nir repeated. "Again, welcome. We're delighted to..."

"Socorro!" A female shrieked from just beyond the wall to his left. "You little stinker!" The voice sounded similar to Shari's.

The boy laughed and sounded like he was running.

It smelled of food cooking around here. This house did seem larger now that he thought about it. It must be the pub.

"Shari might be inside. I should move away from here," he thought. "I don't know what will happen if she finds out I stole her supplies." The image of her murderous expression inches away from his with the dagger to his throat flashed in his mind. It sent a chill up his spine.

"A-anyway," Nir continued. "We could use help with the forestry, transport, construction and cleanup. The sawmill is fully manned but they may have some work to do."

"Anything's fine." Vilkas bobbed his head to his right. "Not much good with carpentry," he clarified.

"Uh, well, let's start by introducing you to the cleanup leader and we can go from there," Nir said.

"Yeah."

"Great," Nir said and clapped as he turned. "This way."

It seemed the construction crew was replacing the thatched roof. Vilkas caught the human before the fire did too much damage to that house – shop, rather. Merchants were prepping their stalls down that direction along the road.

He saw the rest of the destruction. Nearly half the village was wiped out. They must have breached the South and moved North. The shops were destroyed along the road this way as well.

"You from around here?" Nir asked, glancing over as they walked.

"No," Vilkas replied.

"Uh, what brings you out this way? I-if you don't m-mind my asking?" Again he glanced over for the reply.

"This," he replied dryly.

Nir was quiet for a moment. "Right. As you said before," he said deflated.

They continued in silence as they reached the halfway point. He could see a rather large group of men and women moving large and small charred objects, shoveling smaller chunks into carts, moving the carts and other things. They looked like a typical village of mixed breeds and races.

He stopped and glanced over as Nir stopped and turned to him. Nir looked up at him apologetically. "I'm sorry. I forgot to mention before, but we can't pay for labor. It's all going into the rebuilding and supplies...funds set aside for the families to live on." His eyes had drifted away. It looked as if his eyes were watering. "But," he said quietly and looked back up. "We are offering free meals and any one of us is willing to offer a place to stay. The inn and pub are already spoken for, but I'm sure we can..."

"Food is enough."

"Are you," Nir began, sounding confused. "But we...I won't press the issue, but..."

"Then don't." Vilkas looked ahead and began to walk.

The attack looked like it started wide and became more focused on the merchants as they neared the center. He glanced to the right and paused. There was a shop on the right that brought an image of a person running at him to mind. Flowers were at the entryway. They looked as if they'd been there for a while. Objects that looked like large hooks were in the entryway behind a counter that had caved in on itself. Several ruined knives were scattered along the floor. He continued walking.

"There's a spot where you can stow your things," Nir said, breaking the silence. It seemed Nir finally lost the cheery tone that was annoying him. "Any one of us won't mind taking them for you and bringing them by at the end of the day. I would, but I have to leave early to help my father at the mill in the morning. I'm sure when the ladies bring lunch, one of them would be more than happy to watch them."

They finally approached the work site. It seemed the more capable men were handling the large items while the thinner men and women banded together to clean the smaller debris.

He saw a makeshift shelving unit on the right with various objects on, in and around it. He walked over to it and set his pack near on the end closest to him. He drew the sword halfway and carefully grabbed the blade. He finished the draw and let the handle dip toward the ground. He set the pommel in the dirt in front of the knapsack and angled the blade up until it tapped against the shelf.

"NIR!" An older sounding man with an accent called out.

"Sir Seppo!" Nir called back. "A new volunteer!"

Vilkas turned and looked over to see a feline man about Nir's height walking toward them. He was thin, yet muscular with sandy brown fur. What immediately drew his attention was the dark-tipped ears with long tufts at the ends and dark spots along his arms that seemed to fade further up. His eyes were so light brown they were almost clear. White circles around the eyes made them seem even lighter. A dark line arched from the edge of his eye to behind his jaw. His clothes were nearly dyed black. His arms were mostly the same and he had several swipes along his face and neck that looked like stripes.

"Pleased to have...you," Seppo said as he came close, staring at the new person's current state. He stopped and looked up in the larger man's eyes with a grin. "Seppo," he said and extended his left hand.

He glanced down at the hand and back. He squinted and accepted the offer. "His grip could rival mine if he got serious," he thought. "Vilkas," he said.

"Seppo is the town metalsmith. He will also leave earlier than others to assist the blacksmith with making nails and braces for construction. But he is in charge of the cleanup crew," Nir explained.

"Feel free to ask anyone any questions," Seppo said and ended the handshake. "If they don't know, I'll figure it out. Don't be shy around me either," Seppo explained. He glanced over his shoulder and mocked a server carrying a tray with his left hand. "As you can see, everyone pretty much knows what to do." He brought the hand down and grabbed his belt at the buckle as he turned back. "There's really nothin' to it," he said and winked. He motioned with his thumb behind him. "Larger items are carried to the end of the row and the carts are dumped in a pile until we can figure out what to do with it all." He brought the hand down to his hip. "Smithy shops are already burning through what they can."

Seppo looked to the right suddenly. Nir looked, too. Vilkas looked over but didn't see anything.

"Any what's-it," Seppo said and they all returned their gazes. "Food and drink will be served in an hour or so. Dinner comes long before nightfall." He motioned over to his left with his head. "Tables are set up on the other side."

Quicker than last time, he looked to his right and squinted. "Eyes must be tired. Or I'm hungry and don't realize it," he said and squinted deeper. "I keep seeing things. If someone's curious, there's no need to be sneaky about it," he muttered and looked back at Vilkas. "You look like you've seen your share of tussles, but you're here to help so you can't be that scary," he said honestly.

"Says you," Nir muttered under his breath.

Vilkas looked sidelong over at Nir causing him to flinch.

"Ha ha-ha!" Seppo laughed. "Let's get at it," he said and turned to his right and gave the road a long look before returning to work.

#####

Vilkas was greeted by several villagers as he went to begin work. Several others did the same as they came by. They all tried to strike up a conversation, but he just

continued working while giving short answers. He got a few that watched in awe as he carried large beams on his shoulder to the dump site.

The work was filthy. He hadn't worked long before his new tunic was black or shades of gray.

Among the debris were some items that were partially intact. Some of the less important or ruined items were tossed into a cart with the rest of the debris. Some items were set to the side for the owners to go through.

He couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching him. He did his best to ignore it. There were many eyes out here so it was easy to feel that way. "Strange person in a village this close knit," he thought. "Suppose it's just them watching out for each other. Especially after a disaster such as this."

He had just hoisted another beam atop his shoulder when a woman called out, "Lunch time!"

It sounded like that woman from inside the pub. He glanced over. It was a woman that looked like Shari, but taller and more developed in areas. He could see Socorro next to her carrying a tray of cups and tankards.

"Best to stay away," he thought as he looked back and continued towards the dump site.

"Vilkas," Seppo said as he came out of a broken entryway. "Come eat with us."

"No. I'm fine," Vilkas said as he stopped.

"We'd enjoy it if you did, but we won't force you," Seppo said and clapped his hands of some dust. "Still, at least drink something. The heat will catch up to you if you don't."

"Yeah. Later."

"Offer's open whenever you're ready to accept," Seppo said and walked up to him.

"Yeah."

He took a step but stopped when someone called out, "Shari! Good seeing you!" He flinched and grit his teeth before he continued ahead.

"Hmm," he heard Seppo hum behind him.

He could feel his face get warm. "Not good," he thought. "I have to keep it together."

As he walked back from the dump site, he could see the woman and Socorro walking away. A drinking water bucket was atop the shelving unit.

Shari was walking a bit behind them. She was wearing an ankle-length, cream colored dress. It had a wide, sky blue stripe down the front with a matching waist tie. The sleeve ends and bottom hem were frilly and lacy. Her hair was pulled back and in a large braid. A clump of bangs dropped on each side of her face with tiny ribbons spaced apart down the last half of the strands.

He stopped and gripped the tunic in the middle of his chest. "What is this?" He thought. He could feel his whole torso shake with each heartbeat. It felt like his stomach danced as if he'd eaten something that he shouldn't have.

She stopped in the middle of the ruined house to her right. The sun illuminated her as if she was the only one standing in it.

"Hurry up, Aunlie Shlari!" Socorro called.

"Coming!" She called back. She stood there another moment before making her way down the path.

"I don't think she saw me," he thought as his body calmed down. "I don't understand what's happening to me. I don't seem to be ill when my face burns or my heart pounds..." He shook his head and went back to work.

#####

Several hours passed. There were a few more times he felt as if he was being watched. He ignored them in turn. He did make his way to his pack and used his tankard to get a drink. He left the tankard next to the water pail and returned to work.

The workers talked among themselves as they worked. He kept to himself, mostly handling the larger items. Seppo called on him to assist with a few of the

massive floor beams. Every house was being scrapped to the dirt. They completed one and had the next one cleared of the large items.

He was taking a quick drink when he saw a group coming their way. A few of them had carts with covered pots and pans. Another had dishes and dinnerware. He noticed Shari among them. He set the tankard back down and went back to work. He found a large roof beam and shrugged it over his shoulder.

"Dinner's here!" That pub woman called.

Several cheers rang out and the sounds of tools dropping followed.

He made his way down the path and heaved the log atop the pile. He sighed and itched his forehead.

"I can't go down there. I feel as though she still doesn't trust me. Maybe if I keep helping, I won't feel as if I should hide from her. And Socorro," he thought. "He's the only one that knows who I am, I've gathered."

He sighed and made his way to the nearest house. He sat down at the end facing the piles of rubble. The pit was nearly full. They'd have to dig it wider or have another made before long. The log pile was getting rather tall, too.

The sounds of happy people, clanging plates and singing birds filled the air. A breeze brought in the smell of food. He was beginning to feel hungry.

"I'll hunt or fish for something later," he thought as he watched the breeze rustle the crops.

Some time passed. He watched some feral animals slowly walk along the end of the field to the left. He tensed up as he heard footsteps approaching. He instinctively reached for his sword. He realized it wasn't there and tried to relax.

Seppo walked around the corner carrying a loaf of bread and his tankard. "I was ordered to bring this to you, Vilkas," Seppo said as he looked down.

Seppo knelt down and presented the items. It was about a foot long roll of bread commonly used for large sandwiches or cut up for dinners. In between the halves was some sliced meat and vegetables. The sandwich was rolled up in a thin cloth. The tankard smelled of cranberries. Perhaps a few other berries mixed in for sweetness.

Vilkas reached up and grabbed the tankard, setting it to his side. He grabbed the sandwich and let it rest in his lap. "Thank you," Vilkas said as he looked at the sandwich.

"I realize you're new here," Seppo spoke as he looked toward the rubble piles, "but we're good people. Some will shy away at first, but they'll come around." Seppo looked down at his hands and wiped some of the dirt from them. "It's odd for Shari to speak up for a stranger. But," he said and looked up, "she's so kind. I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

Vilkas sighed through his nose, catching a glance from Seppo. He lifted up and bit into the sandwich. The crust was slightly crunchy and the inside was incredibly soft with a slight sweetness. The meat and vegetables were delicious. There was a tangy spread on it that brought it all together.

"Something has been troubling me about her lately," Seppo said as he looked at his hands while picking bits out of his fur. "She's denying anything and you're not one to talk...", he said and brought his hands into fists. Seppo pumped his fists and stood. "It's probably me overthinking things," he said and turned away. "Thank you for your help. Enjoy the food...friend," he said and walked away.

"This isn't good," Vilkas thought as he looked at the sandwich. "I don't want to cause any trouble."

He stayed lost in thought as he finished the sandwich and washed it down with the sweet and tart drink. He shook out and folded the cloth before setting it next to him. He sighed and leaned against the wall of the burned home.

"I don't belong here," he said quietly as he watched a large bird float in the new breeze. "Maybe I should leave."

#####

They worked until the sun turned the sky orange. Seppo, Nir and a few others left some time ago. The tools were gathered in one of the empty carts. They all departed towards their homes or shelter for the night.

Vilkas started working a support beam from the floor of the site as one of the females walked up to him. She was a larger woman with round features. He guessed she was a feline breed - perhaps panther.

"Vilkas," she said, her voice very much motherly.

He stopped moving the pillar and turned toward her.

"I know Seppo said you were fine, but if you need a place to wash up or even stay, we're at the end of the street with the pub. My husband and I would be more than happy to have you."

"These people," he thought. "I'm fine. Thank you," he said and turned to the pillar.

"The offer still stands. We really appreciate you taking the time to help us out." Her eyes were squinted and her smile was wide. Everything about her expression seemed overly friendly.

He worked the pole free and leaned it against his shoulder. "Yeah."

"Well, have a good night, dear." She walked from the house and joined a group by the road.

He grunted and shimmied the pole onto his shoulder. He dropped off the pole and returned to his pack. He sheathed his sword and pulled the pack rope over his shoulder. He walked toward the town center and stopped by the road leading to the pub and to Shari's. He looked at the outer walls of both places. Light shined out from the windows and the pub sounded busy. He turned to the left and walked down the road. He turned right at the end of the town and made his way towards the river.

A large tree was close to the bank. He took the knapsack from his shoulder and set it against the base. He undid the buckle around his waist and set the belt and scabbard with the sword next to it. He opened his pack and brought out a thin length of rope. He found a downed branch nearby and stabbed it into the ground. He undid the bandage around his arm and placed it in a pile next to the water. He tied the rope to the tree and the branch. He took off his clothing and placed it in a pile with the bandages.

The water was cold. He rinsed the clothing and set it across the rope to dry. The bandages were trickier to hang. They weren't spotless, but most of the grime had washed out of them. The tunic and bandages were no longer white. The trousers were stained. His undergarments were just as dirty with the dried blood across the front and back.

He lowered himself into the water and scrubbed off. The cool water felt good against his aching muscles. He scrubbed his head and shook off the excess water. He lay back and let the current lap water against his shoulders.

The moon crept out from behind a cloud and illuminated the area. He thought more about the people here and if he thought he could stay here. He thought of the previous night with Shari.

"No," he thought. "I'll help them clean up and I'll move on. If there's a repeat attack, I'll help them out, but I can't stay here."

Something caught his eye at the shore. Stacked up next to his pack were some things that weren't there before. A paper fluttered in the breeze. He stood and walked over to the new items. On top was a cloth that seemed to be wrapped around some bread. A note was tucked underneath. A towel was below that.

He picked up the note and looked around. There was no one there. He folded and shoved the note into his pack and placed the bread inside on top. He walked a distance away and shook off some of the excess water. The towel dried most of the rest. He spread the towel down on the grass and laid on top of it.

"That woman," he thought. He felt that strange feeling in his chest and stomach again. He groaned and turned on to his side and closed his eyes. "This towel smells like her," he thought as he drifted off to sleep.

#####

He had a strange dream. He was walking through the town with Shari.

Socorro was playing ahead of them - dancing and doing stupid kid things.

She was smiling and he felt happy. She ran ahead of him and turned. She had her hands behind her back, a huge smile on her face and she was slowly swaying.

He came close to her.

Her hands came from behind her back and out to him.

He suddenly fell backwards. He kept falling. Further and further down some pit until darkness was all he could see.

He woke up and gasped as he opened his eyes. He was still on the blanket. It felt damp beneath him but he felt mostly dry. The sun was beginning to come up. He sat up and looked around. A breeze brushed his back. He stood up and walked over to the clothes that had fallen sometime in the night.

Except for the thicker parts, they were dry. He dressed and reset the rope. He draped the towel over the rope and went to grab his tankard. He pulled out the bread inside his pack. He sat by the tree as he ate one of the large, flat, round rolls. He sat for a few moments before making his way to the work site.

He was the first to arrive. He placed his tankard on the shelf with the pack and sword. He moved two more support beams before the first workers arrived. They called out greetings and the others stood by talking for a bit. Some more showed up and they all began clearing out some of the debris.

An hour or so went by. As he hoisted another beam atop his shoulder, he caught something brown and white out of the corner of his eye. When he looked properly, it was gone. He came back from dropping off the beam and Seppo came up to him away from the others.

"Morning, Vilkas," Seppo said.

Vilkas nodded and stopped in front of him.

"Now I'm certain," Seppo said quietly with serious eyes. "You seem to have caught the eye of a certain someone. I saw her peeking around the corner at you as you were walking away. Perhaps you should try talking to her," he said and smiled warmly.

Vilkas' lip twitched as he looked away. "Maybe. Not sure it's a good idea," he said as he rubbed his wrapped arm.

"I think she's curious about you. She's a doctor and there's someone with a bandaged arm. That's the feeling I get anyway," Seppo said and nudged Vilkas' shoulder. "No pressure but maybe indulge her curiosity one of these days."

Seppo turned and went to speak with one of the other workers.

"Yeah," Vilkas said and continued working.

It wasn't long before they had the third site cleaned up. The previous one just needed rubble cleared and the floor pulled up.

Seppo said they were working faster than the sawmill could cut the lumber. A few of the cleaners started alternating between that and manually shaving and cutting the cords of wood. The construction crew started work rebuilding the floor of the first site as lunch was served.

He worked through lunch again. Seppo brought over some fruit that Vilkas munched on between trips. Seems that it was insisted upon again.

For dinner, Seppo brought over a plate of meat and vegetables with a roll and butter. Again Seppo mentioned joining the rest of the group and left it at that.

At sundown, the panther woman stopped to bid farewell.

"Maybe she was hoping I'd accept her offer," he thought as she walked away, though she didn't bring it up this time.

He did take a detour to the river as some children were playing near the pub. It was the first time he's seen so many in the town. He almost wondered where they were during the day. "Perhaps helping adults with food or farming," he deduced.

It felt a little colder tonight. The river was definitely colder.

He had a care package waiting for him. More bread, a towel and a note. The other towel was gone. It seemed that his "admirer" stopped by before he got there.

There wasn't much of a breeze all day and it stayed that way into the night. The cold did relax his muscles more. Perhaps he would be able to sleep better as well.

#####

He awoke slowly. The breeze had picked up and was blowing his clothes around the ground. It seemed the stake had fallen over long ago. He was shivering and huddled up with the towel around his shoulders and torso.

"I need to get a fire going," he thought and started devising a plan:

First, he needed sticks of various sizes for fuel.

Second, he needed something dry and easy to burn.

Lastly, he needed to prepare an area to burn in.

He unwrapped from the towel and folded it. He tossed it next to the tree and began to gather his clothing. They were all still damp from the wash. He put all articles atop the towel and placed his knapsack over the pile to keep them from scattering again. He stepped into the undergarments and grabbed his sword.

He followed the river to the trees and began collecting twigs, branches and leaves. He almost dropped the leaves when he found a rotting stump further in.

"Coming back to pick you apart," he thought and dropped his haul back at base.

He used the sword to cut a circle large enough for a fire next to the short drop-off to the river. He sunk the sword in at a sharp angle in and pried the grass up around the circle. He carefully cut as he pulled up the sod. He finally had a large enough circle to, hopefully, light a safe fire.

He cut and placed down several chunks of the larger branches within the circle. He went back to the rotted stump and hacked it down to where it was solid. He bashed apart the stump until he found the core. As he was bringing it back to camp, he could hear birds chirping in the distance and the beginnings of sunrise.

"I have a feeling this is going to be a bad day," he thought.

He placed the rotting core against the tree. He used the cloth from around the fresh bread roll to wrap the core and placed it in the knapsack. He sighed and dressed in the damp clothes. He sat and relaxed against the tree for a few minutes eating the bread as he watched the sun come out. He carefully wrapped his head and arm before making his way to the work site.

It was another laborious day. It wasn't as warm as previous days. As the day went on, clouds began to form in the sky. He collapsed by the house next to the refuse piles and napped instead of eating at lunch. He awoke and ate the small sandwich someone left next to him before returning to work.

His body ached more than normal. He felt pressure in his nose. He was still tired after the nap. He could remember feeling ill before but still having the energy to walk through the day or fight off some random band of thugs. This felt different.

Dinner time came. Seppo stopped by but didn't have time to talk. Something about being behind on his other work so he left after eating.

Vilkas ate the plate of food and bowl of soup Seppo brought plus the extra bread he had in the knapsack. After about an hour, he felt like his energy had returned - despite his nose starting to drip.

It smelled like rain was incoming. He made sure to build a fire first. The river water was still cold. Maybe even colder than it was the night before. He kept looking over at the tree. There wasn't a care package tonight. He thought maybe she forgot. It made his chest feel heavy when he thought about it.

"Yet another new feeling," he thought and lowered his head into the water.

He used his hand to clean off the soot as the water passed over him. He laid back in the water and allowed it to pass over his head. His eyes felt heavy. He let out a long sigh and stood out of the water.

"Pervert."

He quickly wiped the water from his left eye as he brought his right foot towards the voice and his left fist to his side. He saw Shari standing by the fire holding her hands over the flames. His heart had skipped a beat in surprise but was now beating rapidly. His cold body was starting to warm up.

"You've been ignoring me," she said calmly as she stared at the small fire. "Or avoiding me. I can't tell which."

She sounded like she was sad and slightly agitated. She wasn't wearing the dress from earlier in the day. She wore leather shoes, dark blue trousers and a light brown leather jacket that was lined with short black fur.

He eased his stance and stepped out of the river. He grabbed yesterday's towel from near his pack. "What did you need?" He asked as he toweled off.

"I don't know," she said, sounding upset. "I figured I made myself clear in my notes, yet here I am."

"I don't understand," he stated as he wrapped the towel around his shoulders. A breeze caused a chill to fill his damp fur.

"I guess...", she said as she slowly made fists with her hands and lowered them to her sides. She bit her bottom lip several times as if struggling with something internally. The light from the fire reflected off her glasses as she glanced over at him.

She wore a slight scowl. "I guess I don't either," her voice wavering, her lips quivering as she spoke.

She looked at him side-long for several moments. Her eyes began to water and a tear fell down her cheek. She turned away from him and started walking away.

He watched her walk away as the tight feeling began to creep into his chest. He placed his left hand over his sternum and sunk his claws into his fur.

"I don't...understand," he said.

She was out of view before he finally moved.

He placed more large branches onto the fire. He moved the clothes line closer to the fire. He used a large, flat rock to pound the branch stake into the ground. He hoped that it would stay put longer than it had the previous nights.

The wind began to pick up. He lay on the towel and watched his clothing to make sure it was all staying on the line. Satisfied his belongings should still be there in the morning, he curled up and closed his eyes while he listened to the crackling fire.

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