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

Chapter 5. "Stupid, Ignorant Meathead"

He awoke suddenly as something kept touching him. The wind swept through the leaves above him and the remaining flames of the fire danced sideways. Rain slapped against his face. He shot up and went to his clothing. It felt slightly damp. He quickly took the items from the line and stuffed all of it into his knapsack. It wasn't waterproof, but he thought it was better than leaving it out in the rain. He put the remaining branches, twigs and leaves onto the fire, wrapped the towel around him and tried to sleep. He was finding it hard to breathe through his nose.

The leaves erupted as the rain pelted them with force. He covered his head with the towel as his body was assaulted by massive drops of rain. The village disappeared with the sheet of water falling from the sky. He shivered harder and harder with every gust of wind. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to control his breathing.

"I can handle this. I've slept in much worse," he thought as he remembered sleeping in that snowstorm. "But I was sleeping in a lean-to, had a thick blanket, thick clothes and the warmth of the hot cider ale in my blood."

He sneezed. Snot shot out of his nose and mouth. He sniffed in the remnants and coughed out a mass of snot. The towel was helping to keep the rain from hitting his face, but it was becoming colder on his skin under the cloth shelter.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there. He was beginning to shiver so hard his stomach ached. The only comfort he could find in the whole situation was when he sniffed in and could barely pick up Shari's scent. He thought about that look she gave him before she walked away.

"I don't understand," he repeated over and over in his head as he thought about her.

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He felt his body come to. He pried his eyes open to the sound of the river rushing beside him. He felt cold and soaking wet. He coughed and felt his body scream with pain. It was a struggle to free his head from the sopping confines of the towel.

He finally found the strength to push it around his face. The end of the towel slapped against the wet grass beside him. He felt his hand sink into the grass and soil as he pushed his body up. Water poured off of his drenched fur. He looked down to see his legs covered in grass and dirt. He powered himself up and stumbled into the fast-paced flow of the river. He eased himself down and allowed the water to clear away the dirt.

As he stepped back onto the raised shore, he noticed the fire must've gone out shortly after he passed out - whenever that was. Partially burned branches remained in the makeshift pit.

His body screamed in pain again as he shook the excess water from his fur - specially when he shook his head. It felt as if his brain detached and was a compass needle bouncing around inside the domed confines. He nearly lost his balance several times as he walked over to his knapsack while pressing the water from his body. He fell to his knees attempting to kneel down. He sneezed and took a moment to compose himself.

It took several times longer to dress. The clothes were slightly damp. He was glad the container held out the water as well as it did. He wasn't sure what time it was, but he finally made it to the work site.

"Why am I even here?" He thought to himself. "I shouldn't have come."

There were far fewer people moving about today. Seppo and the panther woman were there. He did notice people working in the fields this morning. Far more than he usually saw in the morning.

"Thank you for lunch, gang," he heard Seppo say as Vilkas walked just in sight of him. "Valeska, tell your sister I hope she gets well soon."

As Vilkas walked closer, he saw that larger 'Shari' woman.

"I'll let Shari know if I see her," Valeska said back and began to walk away.

He walked up and set down his belongings with a lot more noise than usual. Seppo looked over.

"Afternoon, Vilkas. Just missed lunch."

Seppo looked him up and down. "You look like death marching, kaveri. Ehkä, you should head home and rest."

"I'm fine," Vilkas said. "Moving feels better."

Seppo looked at him suspiciously. "Well, alright." his expression lightened. "We're short today. Many had to work in the fields due to the downpour we had last night. Mostly the lower hanging crops to keep them from drowning."

He motioned over to the ruined houses. "It is slow going. Construction has to stop until the wood dries a bit. We're all working in one spot today so feel free to join us," he said and smiled.

"Yeah," Vilkas said and followed Seppo to the house.

For several hours, Vilkas struggled. His nose kept dripping and people kept trying to talk to him. It was getting irritating. They managed to clear out the remaining debris from the current house and packed up to move. Seppo told them to leave the flooring until the rest of the crew joined them tomorrow.

The crew moved the gear to the next location and set to work. The panther woman smiled as she managed to make her way to work with him. She held the scoop as he shoved chunks of charred remains inside with a flat shovel.

"Are you feeling alright, dear?" She asked, her eyes glinting with kindness.

"I'm fine," he said, feeling his ears warming - not with that new sensation as with Shari, but with the familiar feeling of anger.

She took the scoop to the cart and returned to accept another.

"I didn't see you for lunch. If you're hungry I can get you some soup or a..."

"I'm fine," he repeated, feeling increasingly irritated. "Why do these people have to be this nice?" He asked himself. "It makes wanting to kill them for pissing me off that much harder."

She left and returned again. She still wore the smile but her eyes held sadness. He felt his anger rising as she spoke. "A hot bath might feel good. Won't you follow me today? You look as if you spent the night out-..."

"I said I'M FINE!" He yelled and threw the handle of the shovel to the floor.

All work and noise stopped and silence filled the air. It felt like the world stopped as he stomped out of the house.

"Leave him be, rakas," he heard Seppo say.

"I hate this place! I hate these people! I hate everything!" He shouted in his head and walked down the path. "I just want to kill them all!"

His claws dug into his palm as he felt the heat emanating from his head. He barely caught himself as he stumbled in a small divot in the road.

"RRRAAAHHH!!!" He bellowed and threw his fist through a crumbling wall.

He stumbled as he drew back his fist. He caught himself and bent over with his hand clutching his knee. He was struggling to breathe. His head felt like it was about to burst. His stomach clenched.

"It hurts," he said as his eyes began to water.

He held his stomach as he fell to his right knee. He tried to keep his mouth shut, but he couldn't leave it closed for long. He could barely breathe through his nose. His stomach wrenched hard and he brought his hand to his mouth.

"Ur-aah....kah!" He vomited into his hand.

It felt as if nothing solid came up. Only a little fluid splashed through his fingers. He gasped as he pulled his hand away. He retched again, but his stomach only knotted and nothing came up. His vision was blurred with tears as he gasped for air. He blinked away the obstruction and looked at his hand.

"B-blood," he muttered and felt his head spin. His vision darkened.

"Rakas!...paska...Alida!" He could hear Seppo yell. "Dump the cart and bring it here, nopea...quickly!"

Vilkas could barely open his eyes. Everything was blurry.

"Oh, heavens!" Alida cried out.

He panted over and over. He coughed every so often with a bit of fluid leaving his mouth every time he did. Feet pounded against wet dirt closer and closer.

"Hoi, kaveri!" Seppo called.

Feet stuttered to a stop behind Vilkas.

"Vilkas!" Seppo exclaimed.

Vilkas felt his shoulder being tugged. A faint image of Seppo entered his blurry, slit-eyed view.

"I'm on the ground?" He thought. "When did that happen? Why can't I move?" He felt a hand on his forehead.

"Someone run to Shari and tell her we're coming. Tell her he's burning hotter than helvetti!" Seppo called out in the other direction.

"I'm on it," a young man's voice called back.

Vilkas couldn't breathe. Something gurgled in his throat. He coughed and more fluid left his mouth.

"Paska! Sorry, friend," Seppo said apologetically as Vilkas felt himself rolling back to his side.

The fluid left his throat and he coughed the way free. He began to breath heavily again. "I don't understand!" He kept repeating in his mind.

A rumbling noise approached them.

"We found a tablecloth to keep him clean," Alida said with concern and started breathing hard.

"Bless you, rakas," Seppo said.

Vilkas could hear something rustling behind him.

"There," Seppo said. "That should cushion this bumpy ride a bit, friend."

Vilkas felt himself being lifted from the ground by his back and under his legs.

"Tuomita, you're a big one," Seppo grunted as Vilkas felt himself being carried.

He could feel that he was lying on something that wasn't the ground. There was something white in color he could see close by in half his vision with that color of the cart wall just beyond. The other half was a mishmash of nonsense that he assumed were the ruined homes close by and the earth in the background.

"Hang in there friend," Seppo said as Vilkas felt the cart rumble forward. "Shari's the best doctor in the land. She'll fix you right up." Seppo's tone became strict as he said, "After that, I'd love to have a chat with you."

Vilkas felt the cart slow then picked up speed again.

"I won't tolerate hostility towards my family. Being that you've helped us in our time of need, I'm willing to settle with a gentleman's discussion over drinks." Seppo continued in a hushed tone through partially clenched teeth. "I've a feeling the *other* gentlemanly way would get me killed."

"Momma, whoth dat? Ish he okay?"

"Don't worry, sweetie. Auntie Shari will figure it all out."

Vilkas could hear Seppo breathing hard as the cart slowed. "Shari!" Seppo called.

"Seppo, you get his shoulders. I'll get his legs," Shari called back.

"Do you need help?" An unfamiliar voice asked.

"We can get this. Thank you for letting me know they were coming," Shari politely said back.

"Return to work. Shari's got this," Seppo said calmly.

Vilkas was rolled onto his back. A hand with familiar pads pressed into his forehead. "Any higher and his organs will start to shut down," Shari said with concern as she removed her hand.

"Sorry to bother you when you're under the weather, rakas. This is Vilkas, the man we told you was helping with the cleanup," Seppo said as Vilkas felt pressure on his back and in his armpits. "Is that why he's throwing up blood?"

Shari grunted as Vilkas felt pressure in the back of his knees. "I don't think so. I won't know until I use a thermometer. He's close though."

Vilkas felt himself being carried. The light turned dark as they went into the house. He could taste something bitter on his tongue and could barely smell one of those trees in the northern regions. 'Pine' he believed it was called.

"Let's get him in on the cot," Shari said calmly.

He was lifted a bit more and shifted over. He felt something familiar against his back. His legs followed. He heard some shuffling around.

"Seppo," Shari said with a very serious tone. "Anything you see or hear in this room...stays in this room. Am I clear?"

"Uh, yeah Shari," Seppo said, sounding shocked.

"Good," she said just as seriously. "Get me a cold, damp cloth please," she said more politely.

"On it," he said and hustled out of the room.

"You stupid, ignorant meathead," she said under her breath as she moved around the room.

Vilkas could hear her opening the cabinet and clattering some things around. He tried to glance down and watch her moving. She lifted a container from the cabinet and a needle from the drawer. She loaded the needle and shot a bit of it in the air. The pine smell made it difficult, but he could pick up a stale, mossy smell. He watched as she moved towards him.

"Don't bite this," she said and he felt something enter his mouth under his tongue. It was small, round and glass-like. He felt pressure in his arm. "This will relax you in a few moments. You need to calm down," she said very calmly and courteously.

He felt pressure in his veins and slowly began to feel his muscles relax. He felt his breathing slow and his heart wasn't pounding. His eyes ached as he strained to watch her. He looked back up at the ceiling.

"If you would have read those notes, you wouldn't be like this," she said as if lecturing a child.

"What notes, Shari. What's going on?" Seppo asked.

"Close the door and lower your voice," Shari instructed as Vilkas felt his forehead cool down.

Vilkas heard footsteps and the door closed. The footsteps came closer.

"Shari, what's going on here?" Seppo asked with hushed confusion.

Vilkas felt the cloth cap from his head being removed. He could feel the wrapping around his shoulder leave as if it were being cut.

"I know this man," she said, matching Seppo's hushed tone.

"What!?" Seppo exclaimed quietly. "What are you on abo-..."

"Socorro," she said calmly. "That '*hero*' he keeps going on about..."

"I thought the kid was being a kid. He was serious?" He asked with his voice raised several octaves.

"The man with the shield on his little arm and a sword taking out the bad guys," she said as if Seppo should know what she was referring to.

"That," he said in shock. "That's no broken arm."

Vilkas felt his belt unbuckle and his shirt slowly being removed.

Seppo gasped. "Those scars. The nose. The tail. The flat ear. The muscles. The little arm...", he listed off. "He was serious," he whispered.

Vilkas felt his trousers being undone.

"Yeah. This guy saved this town," she stated. Vilkas felt the object slide from his mouth and clack against his teeth. "One-oh-three. Not good. Roll him over."

Vilkas felt himself roll onto his right side as something clacked against the wood counter behind him. The back of his trousers were pulled down. Something smelled of herbs and mushrooms.

"This will alleviate the fever. You need lots of rest and fluids," she instructed.

It stung as something stabbed his rear. He felt his trousers pull back up and he was rolled back over.

"Shari...I...don't even know where to begin asking questions," Seppo said agasp.

Vilkas felt the cold cloth return to his forehead and compress slightly.

"He kicked down my door. Covered in blood. His muzzle cut here. Slashed here and on his back. This and one on his back, I assume, were from crossbow bolts we found outside. He was stabbed here in the thigh. Here, here and here are where I had to cut him open. He was nearly drained of blood. I've been operating on him and watching over him during the past week and a half."

"And that's why you couldn't help us like you normally do," Seppo realized.

"Yeah," she replied. "I still wasn't certain we could trust him. That's why when he left here, I was tailing him while he was around you all." She sighed. "We interacted a bit while he was awake so I could get a sense of his intentions, but I feared for you all. I've no idea beyond medical data, and my own experience, who this man is."

"I see," he simply stated.

"I'm really sorry, Seppo. I didn't mean to betray your trust. I should have come to you or father, but," she said and sighed. "I panicked. I saw a patient first. I was already deep into operating when I started piecing clues together. And after he stabilized..."

"Well. He kicked down the right door, I suppose," he kidded. "In all seriousness, rakas," he began with a more serious tone. "You're a grown woman who can make decisions. You're regarded as the smartest person in Dalry. I respect your decision up

to the point where he was better. I feel like you should have come to one of us so we could embrace the situation together."

"I know. And that's why I'm not as smart as everyone says I am," she said, defeated.

"Well, I should get back. I've some thinking to do. In the meantime," he said as he circled the cot.

Vilkas felt the compression on the wet cloth ease. It sounded as if they embraced.

"You made your decision," Seppo said quietly. "See it through. Heal your patient. And I don't mean just the outside. If he leaves this house, you are to be with him. He's your responsibility. I can't have outbursts like today happen again."

"Thank you, Seppo," she said, her voice muffled. "I will and I accept responsibility. I'd prefer we keep his identity a secret until he's recuperated. I'll work on that temper of his."

"Good," Seppo whispered. "I have to get back," he said as it sounded like he stepped away from her. "I've got a secret to keep until you give the okay."

"Thank you, Seppo," she said, sounding relieved.

"Get better, kaveri. See you at work when the doctor releases you."

It sounded like Seppo left the room. After some time, Vilkas heard Shari sigh.

"You stupid, ignorant meathead," she said sighed again. "Let's get you wrapped up."

He heard her move around the cot and open a cupboard. It felt like something was draped over him. It felt heavier than the thin blanket he remembered. He could feel her shove the blanket under him as she walked around the cot.

"Get some sleep," she said calmly as she finished. Her tone became serious and strict. "When you wake up, we need to have a talk. And if you leave here again without my permission, I will no longer help you and I will see to it you *never* walk these streets again. Understood?"

She left the room. The warmth spread throughout his body from the blanket. His partially open eyes heavily closed and he drifted off to sleep.

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He woke up to a painful feeling in his gut. He remembered this familiar ceiling. He extracted his arm free of the blanket cocoon and slipped the damp cloth to the side. He peeled the blanket from around his body and swung his legs out. He grunted as he pushed off the bed. He half walked, half stumbled to the door until he crashed into it.

"What the hell?" He heard from the other room.

He opened the door and stumbled to his left and opened the washroom door.

"No-no-no-NO!" Shari cried out.

He stumbled into the bathroom and undid his trousers and undergarments.

"What the hell are you doing!" She yelled from his right.

He opened the toilet basin lid and began to urinate. He could see her out of the corner of his eye. "Have to pee," he said.

"Yeah, I can see that, you pervert," she scolded. "And I'm trying to bathe."

"Yeah," he said as he pushed the remaining bits out.

He replaced his undergarments and trousers. He pulled the rope and let the water run. He stepped over and washed his hands. He dried his hands and placed the towel back on the rack. He looked over at her. She was shaking as she stood against the corner of the wall with her right forearm covering her breasts and her left hand pulling her tail through her thighs to cover her privates.

He'd never really looked at her before. Pointed ears atop her head that were a sandy brown with dark brown tips. Her mid-shoulder length dark chestnut hair that was parted on the right - the bangs at muzzle length that tapered back until it met the full length. Face that had a dark chocolate point that went from the hairline angled down to meet the bridge of her nose. Sandy brown facial fur with a light chocolate strip that went from the bridge of her nose, over the front of her lips and to her bottom jaw. The honey starburst eyes with the dark chocolate rings around the pupil and sclera. She was really thin but he could see she was muscular with her fur fully against her skin. She had dark

chocolate main fur that covered her back. It created shoulder pads and wrapped around her body until the curves reached the front where it was sandy brown throughout. The pure white forearms, bib under her collarbones to the middle of her breasts, the spot that covered her toned abs to her privates, the spots on her knees and toes as well as the underside of her tail. The tail was dark chocolate on top with the white underneath and a sandy brown tip on the underside. Her breasts were smaller and her hips held a much slighter curve compared to her sister's.

"Are you quite finished ogling me, you pervert?" She asked, getting irritated.

"You're pretty," he said and stumbled through the room.

"I hate you!" She yelled in a huff as she sank back into the water.

He closed the washroom door and made his way into the room where he crashed under the blanket. He was out cold within minutes.

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"...-ert...-vert...pervert!"

He groggily woke up. He could smell something through snot-filled nostrils like food. There was also pine and some smell he'd never smelled before. It made his skin crawl.

"Wake up pervert," Shari called as she batted at his muzzle.

"Hmm?" He groaned and opened his eyes as he sat up. He felt like hell had claimed his soul.

"You need to eat something. You haven't eaten since dinner yesterday. I have something to settle your stomach as well. Open your mouth," she said and pulled up on his top lip.

"Mmmn," he protested and did as instructed.

"Good," she said and removed her fingers. "You're still sick, but there's no blood. If there was, I'd have to knock your perverted butt out and dig around some more."

"Yeah," he said and rubbed his eyes of sleep dust.

"Either you have an ulcer or it was a fluke. I'm not sure which without pulling out my hatchet and digging around your insides with blunt sticks, so I've prepared a drink that will settle your stomach," she stated plainly. "Now move your butt. You're sick, but you aren't dead."

"Yeah," he said and forced himself to move.

She was standing beside the cot wearing a snow white gown of sorts with short sleeves that was clinging against her body and reached to her knees. It looked like her sleepwear.

The blanket slid down his shoulder and he pushed it from his legs. He shifted his legs to dangle off the edge. He pulled back his muzzle as she shoved a tankard into his face.

"Drink this. It's an aloe mixture that will coat your stomach and begin to heal any ulcers you may have," she stated plainly. "Regardless, it'll settle things in there."

He took the tankard and smelled it. It smelled faintly sweet and faintly bitter. It was hard to tell for sure what it was with his nose being plugged up from the sickness. He slowly drank it. It tasted like buttermilk in a way. It had the same consistency and the bitter finish. He handed the tankard back to her.

She set it on the counter behind her. She stood in front of him and held out her hands palm up.

"Give me your hands...er...hand," she instructed and corrected her right hand to be outstretched next to her left.

He placed his left hand into her awaiting hands. His hand almost filled both of hers. He curled his fingers as she wrapped hers around. He felt her pull as he pushed with his feet. When he was upright, she held out her right hand in front of his chest. He didn't waver so she moved her hand away. She grabbed his left hand with both of hers and pulled.

"Come on, pervert. A quick bath before dinner. Seppo was kind enough to bring a change of clothes over after you forced your way into my chastity," she said, sounding annoyed.

She led him into the washroom. There were clean clothes and undergarments piled up on the floor next to the counter. A couple of towels were stacked on the hand

wash basin. He could smell her scent filling the room. There was a white, bubbly substance on top of the water in the bathtub.

"That's why you smell so good," he thought.

"Now's not the time for flattery, pervert," she said dryly.

"Huh?" He asked, confused.

"Just get in and scrub," she insisted. "I'll be in to wash your back in a minute."

She left the room and closed the door.

"Huh?" He repeated, even more confused.

He stood for a moment until the confusion passed. It took all his focus to remove the trousers and undergarments. He gingerly stepped into the warm water and sunk all the way in. He saw a bar of soap on the rim of the basin. His nose picked up a faint, but pleasant floral scent. He scrubbed the bar into his arms and shoulders, then his chest. He continued on until he heard a knock at the door. Shari came in with a cloth. She dipped it into the water on his left and looked at him.

"Sit forward," she instructed.

He followed orders. She wrung out the cloth down his back. She repeated this several times.

"Soap," she said.

He handed her the bar. She placed it in the cloth and jostled it around a bit until she handed it back. He held on to the soap as she dug into his back. It felt strange. It made his whole body tingle. He couldn't help but close his eyes and relax. A moan escaped him.

"Pervert," she whispered in disgust.

"Mrr," he growled quietly at himself as his face began to warm.

She stopped scrubbing his back. He heard her dip and wring out the cloth several times. She repeated the process several times over his back and shoulders - letting the water cascade down his back.

"Dinner's almost ready," she said and wrung out the cloth. She draped it over a towel rack next to the door, then she left the room. She quietly closed the door and he heard her walk quietly down the hall.

He finished scrubbing his feet and head, then dipped into the water. He kept his eyes closed as he sighed with content. It felt like his fever was down from earlier. His stomach didn't hurt as much, either.

After several minutes, he heard Shari calling.

"Dinner's ready, pervert!"

He stood from the tub and pressed some of the water from his fur. He carefully reached out for a towel and began to rub it into his fur. He raised one foot and pressed out the water before drying. After repeating the process, he did the other foot. He tried his best not to get any water on the floor. He dried until the towel was spent. He hung it next to the door on the rack. He grabbed the other towel and repeated drying his body before hanging it next to the other towel.

He knelt down and grabbed the fresh change of clothes. It looked strange. Regardless, he deduced that one foot went down one side, the other foot down the other side. His arms went in each side. There was a hood that wrapped around and rested just above his forehead. He buttoned up the front and walked out into the kitchen.

Shari burst into laughter. "Oh-ho! That is priceless!" She gleefully gushed. "That looks good on you!"

He looked down and back at her before exploding in anger.

"WHY THE HELL AM I WEARING PAJAMAS WITH CAT EARS AND A TAIL!!!!???"

#####

"Dinner's ready, pervert!" Shari called.

He snapped awake. He gasped several times as he tried to assess what just happened. "What was that?" He thought as he stood from the water.

He dried himself thoroughly and rushed to the clothes she left for him. "Normal," he thought and sighed in relief. He put on the change of underwear, then the wool lined sleep trousers and shirt. They were cream colored and warm.

He walked from the washroom and into the dining area. Shari was plating the table. He saw a large pot in the middle with meat and vegetable soup inside of it. Bowls and soup spoons were set out across from each other.

Shari looked up as he exited the short hallway. "That looks good on you."

He looked down and back up at her. "Yeah," he replied.

Shari began ladling soup into a bowl. She set it down and repeated the process. She dipped the ladle back into the pot and sat down facing the counter. She held out her right hand to the other side.

"Please sit," she said and looked at him.

"Yeah," he said and made his way to the table. He sat facing her and the door. "Makes sense," he thought and grabbed his spoon.

"You aren't escaping this time even if I have to strap you down," she said dryly and grabbed her own spoon. "Let me know if you feel any pain in your chest or stomach after eating. I don't care if you have to wake me up. Understood," she said, glancing up at him over her armless glasses.

"Understood," he said and began to eat.

She looked down through her glasses and joined in the meal.

It was all very delicious. He filled his bowl a second time before calling it enough. She had herself another ladle full before leaning back and grabbing her stomach with a smile.

"Boy that was good," she said happily. "Father and sister brought over the ingredients," she said as she rubbed her stomach. She opened her eyes and looked at him seriously. "They brought them over because you're here. I hope you appreciate that."

He looked at the pot and to his bowl. "Yeah. Thank you," he said.

He looked up at her as she leaned in. She appeared to be examining him.

"You don't truly mean that, do you?" She asked with an even tone.

He looked at her and thought for a moment. "No," he said and looked into his empty bowl. "I don't understand," he said truthfully.

She placed her hands on the table in front of her bowl and stood. She leaned over until she was inches from his face. He looked up at her and his ears began to heat up.

"You...you are...you're serious," she said quietly. She blinked several times and bit her bottom lip.

"Yeah," he said as his eyes darted back and forth between her widening eyes.

"Do you know how to read and write?"

He shook his head slightly. "No."

"Do you know the meaning of the word 'hospitality'?"

Again he shook his head. "No."

"Have you ever shown someone 'kindness' on purpose? With truth behind it?"

"No," he said as he shook his head.

She seemed to think as she seemed to bite at the inside of her mouth. "So you know how to speak," she began. "And I'm sorry, but I have to ask, but what else did your mother teach you?"

He felt tears well in his eyes as they widened. Just hearing the word brought back the image of her beautiful face. "She," he began but couldn't stop a tear from falling when he blinked. His lip quivered as he continued, "She told me that 'everyone, no matter how bad they are, has some good in them'." He blinked and more tears fell from his eyes. "Just like all the goodness in me," he finished, barely audible. He blinked and his vision cleared.

She looked like she was becoming emotional herself as she leaned back. He could see her eyes beginning to water and sparkle in the light of the lantern. "That's so sweet," she whispered with her own lip quivering.

She clenched her eyes shut and pointed her muzzle toward the table. He heard her slowly breathe deep in and out a few times. She looked up at him. "What did you learn after she...after she passed on?"

He looked down at his bowl for a few moments. Small memories came to him. He looked back up at her. "I was a slave at a mine. So I know that. Then I learned how to fight and survive on my own," he said as he felt the tears leave his eyes. Anger filled his chest and mind. "I was...I was so...so scared at first." He felt his body become filled with hatred. He could feel it in his expression. "Then I wasn't."

She slowly sat in her seat and brought her hands to her mouth. Tears streamed down her face. "Oh heavens," she gasped.

She stayed like that for several moments. She lowered her hands revealing her mouth agape. "Not to insult you, but you don't know anything outside of fighting, do you?" She asked with genuine concern. She stared at him with her mouth slightly open, her jaw quivering.

He felt his expression soften as he pried his eyes off of hers. He looked into his bowl again. "No," he finally said.

She quickly moved from her side of the table and leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his neck. She sobbed into the back of his neck. "Do you know what this means?" She asked quietly.

He shook his head. "No."

She sniveled a few times as she tried to breathe. "Sweetie, it means I feel sad you grew up like that and I'm trying to comfort you."

He listened to her words and thought over what they meant. "I don't understand."

She squeezed his neck tighter as she continued to cry. "No, sweetie. I don't understand."