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

Chapter 10. "Errands"

He awoke feeling better than he had in a long time. He almost jumped to his feet until he realized it was Shari whose arm was across his chest and leg across his.

"Mmm," she groaned and breathed out as she nuzzled against his chest.

He sighed in relief and yawned. If he had to guess, it was past sunrise. His stomach gurgled.

"Hmm-hmm," Shari chuckled. "Must be that time," she said quietly and yawned. "Tell anyone about this and I will end you," she said with a serious tone he hadn't heard in a while. She scratched his chest and sat up. She yawned and stretched while groaning. "I don't know how you can sleep on this," she mumbled. "I'm sore all over."

"Better than the ground in winter," he stated as he felt her warmth leave his side.

"I'll take your word for it," she said and huffed as her hands slapped her thighs. "Still, this is for patients, not for sleeping."

She scratched the back of her neck. She pulled her hand from her neck and let her hair fall from her hand. She stood and placed her hands on her hips. She angled her torso left, then right. She leaned back and groaned as her back popped in a few places. She shuffled out of the room and walked into the dining area.

He sighed with content. "That was...fun? No. Exciting? No. It was...calming having her lie next to me," he thought and sat up slowly. He cracked his neck and groaned. He slid from the cot and followed her into the other room.

She was pulling out a flat pan as the stove fire crackled. "Thank you for doing the dishes, sweetie."

"No need to thank me every time," he said in earnest.

"Yes I do," she said and pulled out eggs from the cooler. "Looks like I need some more," she muttered and set them on the counter. "Et-choo," she sneezed violently and sniffled. "Woo. Excuse me."

"Can I help?" He asked and moved next to her.

"Not really, but you're more than welcome to watch and learn," she said and smiled warmly as she looked up at him. "Kind of running low on supplies so it's just going to be eggs and salt pork."

"That's fine," he said. "I feel...special? Not sure if that's the word."

"What's the word you're looking for mean?" Shari asked as she began to heat the pans.

"Not sure exactly. I just know I've not had meals like you make so often."

"Spoiled," she stated flatly and giggled.

"Thank you...Shari," he said seriously.

Shari turned toward him and placed her hands on his chest. "You're welcome, darling," she said and ran her hands up his chest and behind his neck. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips as she rose on her toes.

"Um...Shari?" He felt the warmth in his face build as he looked at her incoming lips in confusion.

"Hmm?" Her eyes flew open in shock. She looked at his bewildered face. She slowly lowered herself and straightened her lips.

Shari continued to prepare breakfast in silence. It seemed as if she were distraught. She glanced at him several times, but it was in fleeting and spontaneous moments.

His ear turned toward the door. "Someone's coming," he said calmly.

"So...go and hide," she said angrily. She turned toward him with her hands on her hips. "SHOO!" She hissed, her eyes looking irritated.

"It's Seppo," he stated.

"How the..."

"Knock-knock, Shari," the accented voice called.

"Coming, Seppo," she called and stared daggers at Vilkas.

She walked to the door and opened it. The lynx appeared to be carrying several items. "Mornin'," Seppo said and nodded at Vilkas.

"Get in here before the neighbors see the creep in my kitchen," Shari whispered and waved Seppo in.

"Were you supposed to think that?" Vilkas asked.

Shari growled as her eyes snapped to his. "I should remove your ears while you sleep," she grumbled and closed the door behind Seppo, who was suppressing laughter.

"Your sister caught me as I was passing by," Seppo said as he set a basket on the table.

The smell of fresh bread filled the air. Vilkas turned and flipped the pork strips in the pan. Shari sneered at Seppo.

"She insisted this bread gets to you," Seppo said and looked at the sneering Shari. "She wanted to make sure her little sister was eating enough while taking care of her...patient." He looked at the large wolf by the stove holding a spatula. "Maybe I should just leave," he said and suppressed more laughter as his body shook.

"It's fine," Shari spit as she looked at Seppo. "It'll prevent me from grilling wolf meat for breakfast," she venomously said and shot her gaze at Vilkas.

"Wolf meat is tough. Gives you liquid poo," Vilkas stated earnestly.

Seppo snorted while clutching his mouth as he set the other items on the table. Shari clenched her fists, her eyes ablaze with irritation.

"Oh, taivas, you two," Seppo said between chuckles. "I haven't laughed this hard in ages."

Shari glared at the lynx.

"Felines are delicious. Like salty chicken," Vilkas stated.

Seppo's laughter screeched to a halt. "Anyway," Seppo started - his voice high-pitched and cracking - and cleared his throat. "Your other mother, Alida - the panther woman - made these clothes for you, Vilkas," Seppo said and tapped the clothing he placed on the table. "She hopes you're doing well, as do the rest of us," he said and glanced between the two housemates. "Seems you're...much better."

Shari kept her eyes narrowed. "I was going to drag the freeloader with me on some errands. Since he's eating me out of money," she stated and glanced menacingly at Vilkas.

"Well, stop by the worksite and say hello," Seppo said to Vilkas. "Everyone keeps asking me how you're doing."

"If Shari allows it," Vilkas said and looked over at her.

Shari's eyes shot arrows at Vilkas.

"Aaaand with that," Seppo said and bowed to Vilkas and Shari. "Farewell."

"Take care, Seppo," Shari said calmly while staring at Vilkas. "Thank you for bringing the moocher food and clothing."

"Thank you, Seppo," Vilkas said and raised his hand palm forward.

Seppo left out the door. He could be heard laughing for some time as he walked down the road.

Vilkas glanced at Shari. He turned and flipped the eggs. They were starting to get crispy on the bottom. Shari snorted into chuckling.

"That was fun," She said and walked next to Vilkas. She bumped her hip into his thigh to move him out of the way and took over the cooking.

"Yeah," he said as he watched her finish cooking the first batch of eggs. "I don't understand jokes and fun, but it seemed to go well."

"Your deadpan delivery when responding to us was hilarious," Shari said and giggled. She glanced over at him and narrowed her eyes. "Though, with how we know your personality, it may be hard to separate a joke and realism."

"Hmm," he hummed as he thought about her words. "I can understand that, I think."

Shari grabbed a plate from the cupboard and slid the eggs onto it. She placed half of the pork slices next to the eggs and handed it to him. He took the plate and watched as she cracked the remaining two eggs into the pan.

"Thank you," he said and made his way around her.

"You're welcome," she sang and began to hum.

He opened the utensil drawer and grabbed two forks. He closed the drawer and sat at the table. He reached over and placed the other fork next to where Shari usually sat. He moved the clothing in front of him and shifted the bread basket to the middle of the table.

He sat quietly as he listened to her hum. He meant to blink but closed his eyes. His mind was separating the sizzle from the pans so he could focus on the sound vibrating in her throat. He could feel the corners of his mouth quiver and slowly stretch into a smile.

"What's wrong, sweetie," Shari's voice came from in front of him

"Hmm?" He questioned as his eyes opened. He could feel his smile, but he didn't notice the tear that had fallen from his right eye.

Shari moved her plate next to her fork. She picked up the fork and sat in front of him. She rest her elbows on the table and rest her muzzle atop the backs of her hands. She smiled sweetly as she seemed to await his response.

He felt his face warm as he wiped the wet trail from his cheek. "My mother used to hum like that," he said as he looked down at his food.

"I see," she said and blinked slowly. "Thank you for sharing that with me," she said and closed her eyes and expanded her smile. "Oh!" She said in surprise and sat upright, her hands separating. "I forgot some spread for the bread. Do you have a preference?"

"No," he said and grabbed his fork. His smile slowly faded as he thought about his mother.

Shari stood from the table and moved to the cupboard to his right. He nudged the fully cooked eggs with his fork as she moved around behind him. He moved his fork to the other side of the eggs as she grabbed something from the utensil drawer and moved to sit in front of him.

"Apple jam," she said as she undid the lid and set it on the table. "This stuff is delicious."

She reached over and lifted the cloth over the basket. There had to be a dozen rolls inside. She grabbed one and cut it in half. She placed the split bread on her plate and grabbed another roll. She cut that one in half and held the halves in her left palm. He tapped his fork on the pork strips as she dipped the knife into the jar and spread the slightly sweet smelling apple spread onto the halves of the roll. She reached across the table and placed the halves onto his plate on top of the pork strips.

"Try it," she said and repeated the process for the roll on her plate. "I think you might like it."

He pinched the fork in the corner of his thumb and first finger. He grabbed one of the halves of the roll between his second finger and thumb. He took a bite of the roll and felt his lips smile as he hummed his approval.

"Hmm-hmm," Shari giggled as she took a bite of her own roll. She sighed with satisfaction as she chewed her food. "Mmm," she hummed and placed the roll half onto her plate. "I know what will go good with this," she said and stood.

He continued eating the roll with the fruit chunks and gelatin mixture as she poured something into cups. She set an empty carafe onto the counter that had a white, thicker liquid sliding down the inside. She set one cup next to him and returned to her seat.

"This stuff?" He asked as he looked in the glass.

"No," she said and took a sip from her cup. "This is just milk," she said as she placed her cup next to her plate. "I don't think you need that aloe milk anymore. I think your body was stressed out from working hard and not being fully healed from your injuries. But if you do end up with a pain in your stomach or cough up blood, let me know immediately."

He chewed the remaining bite of the fruit topped roll half and took a sip from his cup. It didn't really taste like anything he'd had before. It was similar to the tonic she gave him without the medicinal taste. It almost tasted like the color it was.

"Not sure I've had this before," he said and licked his upper lip of the remnants of the liquid.

"It's just milk," she plainly said and took a bite of one of the pork strips.

"I see," he said as he cut into his eggs.

"It's one of the many things we'll need to pick up. It's a bit difficult passing the main market strip since half of it is gone. But they still need customers," Shari said and finished off the strip. "The stalls are twice as large so we should be done rather quickly."

"You sure it's okay?" He asked as he took another bite of his eggs.

"I think it's time to introduce you to the rest of the family."

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After breakfast was finished and the dishes washed and put away, he made his way to his room and changed into the new clothes. They fit a little snug in the chest and the trousers were a tad large. But the material felt softer than the work clothes he had before. He finished cinching the belt around his waist and made his way to the dining table.

Shari came from her bedroom. She stopped at the end of the hallway. "Does this look okay?" She asked.

Her eyes looked troubled behind those nose glasses.. Her face looked almost sickly. It contrasted with the dress she wore. Her bangs were collected in those familiar strands, but weren't down the sides of her face or with ribbons. They were tied behind her head with a single white ribbon. She was wearing a sun yellow dress that went down to her calves. The sleeves went down just past her elbows. Small, white flowers

lined the hem at her legs and around the collar. A thin ribbon tied around her waist with the ends of it draped down her right side. She carried a large, white cloth bag in the crook of her elbow that she held in front of her torso with the hand clenched in a loose fist by her chest.

"Pretty," he whispered as he felt his heart begin to thump in his chest.

"Nnh," she grunted and her face brightened. "Let's go," she said, "Handsome," she muttered ever so quietly.

"Wait," he said as she walked to the door. She stopped and glanced over her shoulder. "Could you help me with this?" He set down a bit of cloth onto the table. "This was with the clothes."

She walked to the table and set the bag on the bench. She picked up the bits of cloth and examined them.

"It will take too long alone," he said, looking at his right arm.

"Seppo," she whispered and set the cloth down. "Alright," she said and grabbed a cloth cap.

It was a thicker, white fabric. It had a flat top with a medium-sized band. It looked like a lid for a large container. She placed it on his head from behind him and snugged it down. It had a slight but not uncomfortable fit. It reminded him of the caps many merchants wore.

"I'm assuming I'm not putting your ears through the slits," she said.

He shook his head. "It'd be strange with only one ear poking through.

"I understand," she said and picked up the next thicker cloth. "It's part of identifying you, I suppose."

The other thick cloth was in the shape of an arm. She fed his hand through the larger opening and pulled it up to his shoulder. It looked almost like his arm was twice the size. It almost reminded him of the cloth and sap casts put on broken limbs with its thickness. She grabbed the other, thinner cloth that looked like a sash. She placed his elbow and forearm into the thicker part of the cloth and tied it around his neck over his left shoulder.

"There," she said and patted his shoulder. "Identity concealed, I suppose."

He looked at his arm and then at her as she walked around to collect the large bag. "The little one might..."

"I was thinking of that, too," she said and picked up the bag and set the handle back in the crook of her elbow. "He'll be off with the other children at their bi-weekly lessons." She turned toward the door. "The school is gone, but they've been gathering out in the fields to learn about the types of crops we grow here. It'll be fine."

"I see," he said and stood.

He followed her out the door. He stood in the sunshine and looked around. The construction crew was busy putting the finishing touches on the house at the far end. He couldn't really see the cleanup crew as the ruins blocked the line of sight. There seemed to be a busy street at the intersection as many people walked in both directions. A few people were entering the pub. Vendors were calling out to passersby. A loud clanging could be heard from where he assumed the blacksmith was.

Shari began walking away after closing the door. He felt something tighten in his chest as he watched the shoppers and villagers cross the intersection. He stepped back towards the door as a carriage made its way past him.

"Vilkas?" Shari called. He looked over at her. She looked at him with a hint of confusion. She walked back towards him. "You having another strange feeling?" She asked as she wiped her nose with a handkerchief.

He nodded and found his eyes darting at the people that carried weapons.

"I didn't think you'd be afraid of walking around the town," she said as she looked around and back up at him. She squinted her eyes as she placed the handkerchief inside the small pocket on the bag and looked at him closer. "That's not it," she muttered. "You're nervous, I think." She smiled warmly and walked to his left side. She grabbed his arm just above the elbow with her forearm pressed against his. "I'm here with you. It's okay. Come on." She gently pulled on his arm as she took a step forward.

"That feeling's going away," he thought as he looked over at her. "She has such powerful healing abilities."

He found his steps matching hers as they made their way down the path. They crossed the path and stopped outside the pub.

"I know you won't find any deeper meaning in it, but I'd like to introduce you to my family. My father can be a bit intimidating and my sister...might freak out when we walk in together." Her eyes betrayed her smile. She looked nervous. "When you get your own place, you will probably find yourself eating here so we may as well get introductions out of the way."

"I understand," he said and looked at the larger door in front of them.

She let go of his arm and breathed in deep. She held her right hand at her chest in a loose fist. She held her head so her nose angled to the ground with her eyes closed. She opened her eyes and clenched her fist. She looked more confident. Determined. She pushed the large door open. The top of the door struck a small bell that hung from a bracket above the door frame.

He'd seen this type of door before. It didn't have traditional hinges and latching parts. The hinges were angled so the door lifted slightly as you pushed in and swung closed as you let go. A handle on the inside allowed one to leave.

He could see some patrons at the far end eating and drinking at the bar. A couple of tables were full with patrons eating and drinking. A large shepherd that looked similar to Shari stood behind the bar and placed a plate of food in front of a patron. The smell of various types of cooked food and drinks filled the larger room. A quiet murmur was heard as the patrons conversed.

The large shepherd's eyes locked on to his. The smile he was wearing slowly faded as his eyebrows sank close to his broad muzzle.

"Good morning!" A cheerful female sang. "Or is it after..." Her voice cut off as a broom handle struck the floor. "Noon," she muttered.

All conversations stopped and heads turned towards the door as the bell signaled the door closing behind Vilkas. He glanced over where the sound came from. He was clenching his teeth and his fist. He narrowed his eyes upon the taller and more filled out version of Shari he'd seen before. He relaxed his jaw and hand but couldn't help but keep his sharp eyes and cool face.

"Good morning...sister," Shari said and chuckled nervously.

"Sister," Vilkas thought as he scanned the person to his right. "Makes sense." She held her hands up by her torso - the right hand just above the left - in semi-circles, her fingers twitching sporadically.

She was wearing a light green grass colored, tight-fitting, button up blouse with puffy shoulders with sleeves that covered down to her elbows. She wore a poofy and frilly skirt that went to her mid thigh. The underside of the similar colored skirt had multiple layers of white. She wore white cloth gloves that seemed to extend into the white fur that went halfway up her forearms. He could see garter clips connected to the white, thigh-high tights. They stretched down and ended in cloth shoes with soft soles that had a thin buckle strap across the top arch of her feet. Tied behind her slender waist was an emerald green apron that covered just under her ample cleavage to the bottom of her skirt. It looked more decorative than practical.

"Uh-huh...morning," Shari's sister said nervously. Her eyes never left Vilkas. She looked like she'd seen a monster.

"Morning...father," Shari said nervously as she called out to the glaring shepherd behind the bar.

The stout shepherd slowly lifted his nose so it angled slightly up to the ceiling. "Good morning," he called evenly, his voice nearly echoing in the room. His voice wasn't quite as deep as Vilkas', but it held just as serious a tone and boomed from his throat.

The large shepherd wore a similar colored shirt. His bulging biceps strained at the short sleeves covering them. He wore a more practical emerald colored apron. He had white fur gloves. His coloring mirrored closer to the older sister with more dark coloring in the ears, upper arms and a darker colored face and muzzle with the lighter, caramel brown poking through to make it look shaded instead of purely dark.

The patrons began whispering amongst themselves. Vilkas couldn't quite decipher what they were saying. It didn't seem like any of them knew who he was.

Shari walked over and crouched down to pick up the broom. She placed the handle into the open hands of her sister. "What's gotten into you?" she asked her sibling.

"I could ask the same of you," the sister said quietly through clenched teeth, her eyes never leaving Vilkas' direction.

"His fever is gone. He said he'd like to live here so I thought I'd introduce him to everyone," Shari said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Why you?" Her sister grumbled in a hush as she looked at the smaller shepherd in front of her. "He looks like a criminal."

"That's not what you said the first time you saw him," Shari growled quietly through her own clenched teeth.

The sister's shared sneers for a moment as Vilkas glanced around the room. It seemed the patrons went back to their mugs and meals. The large shepherd was still glaring at the man at his door while wringing his hands in front of him. Vilkas could see the muscles dancing under the older, shorter man's fur.

"Be nice," Shari hissed and walked towards Vilkas with her sister in tow. "Hey tall, dark and creepy," Shari said and stopped near him. She motioned behind her. "This is my older sister, Valeska," Shari said, introducing the uneasy looking shepherd.

Vilkas wasn't entirely sure what was a proper greeting. He decided to try one he'd heard before. "Pleased to meet you," he struggled to say as he looked at the uneasy sister. "It sounded better in my head," he thought.

"Pleased...to...meet you," Valeska returned, her uneasiness following her voice. Her hand gripped the broom handle defensively, possibly as if to strike at a moment's notice.

"Vilkas traveled through Orinon to come here. He'd heard a rumor that we needed assistance. He keeps to himself, but he's really grown to love it here. He's, uh, still dealing with some...injuries and a fever, so I said he could stay at the ho...clinic until he's back on his feet." Shari's story and tone wasn't very convincing.

Vilkas nodded, but his eyes left the older sibling because he felt a presence closing in. "That's correct," he said and watched as the stout shepherd drew near.

He was muscular, but his torso was thick. It was becoming clear how Shari was more muscular and Valeska was more filled out. He remembered Shari saying she had to keep her body in shape for her work. It seemed Valeska's curves helped in hers.

"D-daddy," Shari said, her voice trembling. "U-um, this is Vilkas."

"I heard," the gruff man stated. His eyes seemed to be sizing up the larger wolf in front of him.

By Vilkas' assumption: The shepherd was inherently strong while Vilkas himself was trained and honed to be strong.

The shepherd wrung his hands together as he stepped closer to the Vilkas. After another once-over, he extended his left hand. Vilkas looked at the hand and glanced up from it to the serious eyes of his greeter. Vilkas clasped his hand inside the man's hand. Vilkas knew the kind of pressure the man was placing against his hand. Vilkas smirked and squeezed back. The man's eye twitched. He grinned and stepped closer to the wolf.

The shepherd let his teeth glint from between his lips. "Tangi," the man said with a toothy grin, his eyes narrowing even more, his grip tightening around Vilkas' hand.

Vilkas gave his broken-toothed smile back as he wrenched the hand of Tangi. "Vilkas," he said back.

Tangi's lip quivered near his right cheek. He lowered his lip and nodded. He leaned in to the wolf and angled his muzzle up to the side of the wolf's head.

"Put your hands on my daughter and it won't be a handshake I greet you with," Tangi warned quietly and stepped from the wolf, letting his grip free.

"Understood," Vilkas said and lowered his own lip, recovering his hand from the vice.

"Daaaa-deeee," Shari whined.

Vilkas glanced over at her scowling face.

Tangi's expression went to one of a parent's love. "Just greeting our guest, sweetheart," he said politely as his voice would allow and stepped to her, kissing Shari on the cheek.

"Gross!" Shari exclaimed and hung her tongue from between her lips as she wiped her cheek.

"Let's get back to work, honey," Tangi called to Valeska as he walked back to his post.

"Right," Valeska said. Her eyes were still on Vilkas. Her expression softened. She hugged her sister from behind with her right arm. "Talk to you later, sis," Valeska cooed in Shari's ear.

"GROSS!" Shari exclaimed and mocked vomiting. She glared at the giggling sister as Valeska went back to sweeping. "Let's get out of here before I become ill," Shari said sourly as she tugged the door open and stepped out.

"Yeah," Vilkas said and glanced at the two new people in his life. "Was this okay?" He asked himself as he followed her out the door and into the bustling street.

Shari marched down the street towards the far end of town. She was mumbling to herself as she weaved through people and exited to the ruined end of town. She glanced back at him while he walked through the crowd as they avoided him.

"Tch," her tongue clicked as she faced away from him, her pace slowing.

He caught up to her and glanced over at her. She seemed to be biting the inside of her lips. They continued walking slowly toward more familiar ground.

"I'm sorry you had to meet my overprotective father and gossipy sister," she finally said and sighed. "I know they mean well, but they didn't have to embarrass me like that," she muttered. She sighed again and glanced over at him. "Let's go meet with your crew...let them know you're alive."

"Yeah," he said as he continued at her pace down the street.

He could see part of the construction crew thatching together the roof of the first house while others began work on the floor structure of the second house. The cleaning crew was clearing a fourth site and removing large items from the fifth plot.

"Shari?!" A familiar voice called. The young man stepped from the ruins of the fourth house and walked towards them. "And...Vilkas," Nir said without as much enthusiasm.

"Good morning, Nir," Shari called back.

Vilkas nodded at Nir.

"Hoi-hoi!" Seppo called as he set down a partially charred support beam.

"Morning, Seppo!" Shari called and waved to him.

"Vilkas!" Another familiar female voice called.

The friendly pantheress called as she brushed her long skirt of dust while walking towards them.

"Shari!" "Vilkas!" Other voices called out.

Work seemed to come to a halt as people flooded out of the work site. Shari cheerfully called out to the workers. She turned towards the construction crew as more people came out to greet her and to see her companion.

"Seppo said that you were doing well when he stopped by this morning," Alida said with her usual, overly-friendly smile. "Those clothes fit well?"

"Yeah," Vilkas said. "A little tight in the chest and loose in the trousers, but thank you," Vilkas said and attempted a smile.

"I'm glad," she said and then looked a bit down. "Work slowed down when you fell ill. We were all so worried. When are you coming back to us?"

"I'm holding him for a few days," Shari said as if trying to match Alida's demeanor. "He had some prior injuries he didn't want to trouble everyone over. I prescribed him bed rest until he heals a bit more."

"Oh dear!" Alida gasped. "I felt in my bones that something was troubling him," she said and looked over at Vilkas. "You don't have to work yourself like that for our sake, dear."

"Yeah!" One of the soot-covered workers said. "We appreciate your help, but we," he said and looked downtrodden. "We lost our vigor when we watched our hardest worker collapse like that."

"Now that we see you're better," another worker said, "We're going to work extra hard!"

"I'm not going to be outdone by you anymore!" A female proudly stated. Vilkas could see the determination in her eyes.

"Yeah!" "YEAH!" Some voices called out.

"YEAH!!!" They all cheered and raised their fists.

"FULL STEAM AHEAD, EVERYONE!" Someone called out.

Alida smiled even brighter. "Our family won't be outdone by our new friend," she proudly stated. "Thank you, Vilkas!" She said and nodded as she went back to work.

"See everyone for dinner soon!" Shari called out.

Various members of the community called out replies to Shari and continued working.

Shari turned to Vilkas. Her eyes sparkled in the sunlight along with her bright smile. "Someone's popular out here," she said and giggled. She walked past him and giggled again. "Let's get our errands done so you can rest."

Vilkas gave a brief wave to Alida and some of the other workers that looked his way.

"Guess we'll see you soon," Nir said and nodded with a smile.

"Yeah," Vilkas said, still holding his hand up in a wave.

Vilkas looked at his hand as Nir walked away. He dropped it to his side and caught up to Shari.

They walked up to and past several stalls. She pulled out a coin purse several times. He felt a sting in his chest every time she handed out the money. He knew some of that had to have been his. He had to remind himself that he was indebted to her every time he heard the sound of the coins rattling in her purse.

He helped carry a slab of wrapped meat and a carafe of the milk stuff he'd had earlier. Shari stuffed various vegetables and a few dry herbs into her tote. She placed a container of eggs on top of the meat slab he held in front of him.

"Drop these and I won't make breakfast for you," she warned, her expression serious.

"Understood."

"I need to return to work soon. I'm running low on money...maybe another week if we stretch it out," she said, more in thought than telling him.

They stopped at a few more stalls before they started heading back to the house.

"I don't want you to think I'm going broke having you stay with me," she said as they slowly walked. "I kept the coin you had as payment for treating you, but I also have it stashed away in case of emergency."

"I see," he said. He felt a little relieved. "Do I still owe you?" He asked genuinely.

"Well," Shari said and thought a second. "I had to improvise with some of your treatment. I suppose for the experience, I can't place a price on it." She continued looking as if she were deep in thought. She looked over at him and smiled. "As long as you keep helping around the house, I can keep lowering what I think you may owe me so let's call it even for now."

"I think I understand." He thought about the morning they shared and the people they met. "Shari," he said and glanced over at her.

She looked back over at him with intrigue.

"Thank you."

"For what am I owed gratitude now?"

"Thank you for today. And thank you for your kindness."

Shari looked away from him as if troubled. He barely caught a glimpse of her face contorting.

"You're...welcome."