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

Chapter 17. "A Lesson In Life"

Alida looked at him with shock as she brought a hand to her mouth. Rochus' expression was similar, but not as definite.

Vilkas breathed out of his nose. He told them the condensed version of his story much like Shari did with Tangi and Valeska. They both listened intently while occasionally sipping their tea. Vilkas had prepared his tea and was sipping it during his story. He finished telling them about coming into town and meeting Shari.

"I'm a warrior. A killer. I had no reason to stay around people or get to know them. But, when I met Shari, I wanted to live. I still want to die here, but after I've lived a normal life. She was teaching me about talking with people, how to be nice, how to cook and live on my own...she was teaching me things I didn't get a chance to or want to learn as I grew. She was teaching me about feelings and what they mean. Shari was my friend." Vilkas hung his head. "My only friend."

"Shari...*is*...your friend," Alida corrected. Vilkas looked up at her. "That girl has a kind heart and a kind soul. She will always be your friend as long as you are hers. And don't forget about Seppo. He has been wanting to go see if you were okay every day since you collapsed."

"That's a dandy of a life you've lived, son," Rochus said as he pushed his glasses up his short muzzle. "You couldn't have picked a better person to trust. Damn good thing you found her when you did. And I think I speak for both of us when I say we greatly appreciate what you've done for our village." Rochus' speech was much friendlier than before.

"I couldn't agree more. I can't begin to imagine the debt we owe you."

"Please...no," Vilkas said as he swayed his muzzle. "You know my past...I'm not a hero. I don't deserve to be treated as one. I don't like it."

"I get it," Rochus said as he nodded his head. "I'd still like to shake your hand."

"And I would like to show gratitude somehow," Alida said and appeared to think as she brought her loose right fist to the bottom of her jaw. "Perhaps I can help in Shari's brief absence." She smiled warmly and lowered her hand to the table. "If it's alright with you, I can give you a lesson in life..if that will suffice."

Vilkas thought it over. "I don't," he began, but couldn't find a reason not to.

"You can rest on it and give an answer in the morning, dear," Alida said.

"I don't want to burden you. But I have no idea what to do otherwise."

Rochus reached over and patted Alida's hand. "We raised ourselves a fine son. You're in good hands."

Alida's expression appeared to waver, but she kept her friendly smile despite her misty eyes. "Yeah. It's not a burden at all. If we can get you happily living with the others, It would be our pleasure to assist you any way we can."

Vilkas sighed and looked at his empty tea cup. He looked up at them and gave a slight smile. "Yeah."

Rochus smiled and Alida beamed with joy.

"Then let me get your bed ready. Father and I are old and get tired quickly. But you look a bit bushed yourself. Let's turn in for the night," Alida said and looked at Rochus.

"I agree. We've got a full plate tomorrow," Rochus said and stifled a yawn.

Alida stood and moved around the table. She leaned in and wrapped her arms around Vilkas and kissed the side of his head by the broken ear. Vilkas sat up like a board and glanced over at Alida.

"Thank you, dear," she said and gave him a squeeze before moving down the hallway.

Rochus marked his book and stood. There was a quiet footfall followed by a clunking. He made his way around the table. Vilkas looked down and saw that one of Rochus' legs was missing and replaced by a thick wooden pole that ended in a small, flat board that was curved at the "toes".

"Got Shari to thank for giving me my legs back," Rochus said as he tapped his prosthetic on the floor boards. He held out his left hand.

Vilkas stood and accepted Rochus' hand. Rochus gently shook Vilkas' hand and clapped his right hand against Vilkas' shoulder.

"Thank you, son. When you're ready, I know the rest of our family would love to thank you as well. Hero or not, there's no avoiding it."

Vilkas sighed in defeat. "I understand."

Rochus chuckled as he reclaimed his hand. His expression turned a bit sad. "If only you could've been here sooner," he muttered. He shook his head and forced a smile. "You did what you could and we thank you for it. We're proud of you," he said and made his way down the hall.

Vilkas grabbed his knapsack and made his way down the hallway. A closed door was on the left. Rochus went in the last door on the right. The door was open on the left. He glanced in and saw Alida shaking a blanket over the bed. There was a closet on the far right end with a dresser inset to the right of it. A desk was against the far wall with a chair. There was an empty bookshelf on the left wall. A crate was between the desk and the bookshelf.

"There you are, dear," Alida said as she brought her hands to her hips and looked over the bed. She turned to face Vilkas. "The washroom is the first door on the left. If you need anything, we're right across the hall. If you get hungry or thirsty, our kitchen is yours. Make yourself at home." She smiled brightly.

"Thank you...for everything," Vilkas said and gave her a smile.

"Right then," she said and walked towards him.

Alida stopped and looked up at him. Her expression turned a bit sad. She leaned in and hugged Vilkas softly as she rested her head on his chest. "I'm sorry, dear, but I feel I have to do this," she said softly. "You did all you could." Alida stayed like that for a moment. "Good night, dear. Tomorrow is a better day."

Alida pulled away and gave him a pleasant smile as she touched the sides of his arms. She dipped her head as she made her way into the other bedroom and closed the door.

“Mamma?” Rochus asked.

Vilkas could hear quiet sobbing through the door as he stepped into the room and closed the door. He could hear them talking quietly for a few minutes as he unpacked his nightwear. He changed into it and folded his clothes, placing them on his knapsack next to the bookshelf. He made his way onto the bed and lay on top of the blanket.

He thought about Shari as he closed his eyes. He felt that empty-feeling pain in his chest. He felt like crying. Tomorrow was going to be difficult without Shari in it. He inhaled and exhaled deeply.

“Maybe it’s how it should be,” he thought, but couldn’t stop thinking of her.

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“What’s wrong, Darijus?” Mother asked as she rubbed my back.

I was crying uncontrollably. “I lost my puppy!” I wailed.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. We had to run. We weren’t welcome there any longer.”

Mother continued to rub my back and placed her hand on top of mine.

“I’m sure he’ll come back some day.”

“No he won’t!”

“Oh, sweetie. Your friend isn’t gone. They’re waiting for you to come back. I’m sure you’ll see them again some day and they’ll be so happy to see you.”

#####

“There-there, dear.”

Vilkas awoke. He began breathing hard, the sinking feeling in his chest was incredibly painful.

"It's alright. Mamma's...I'm here for you. You're safe now."

Vilkas was lying on his right side with his knees bent up towards his chest. He glanced over his left shoulder. Alida was sitting on the bed with her eyes sleepily closed wearing a smile. He felt her rubbing his back and her left hand was on his hip.

"You were crying out Shari's name, dear. She's not gone forever. You'll see her again someday soon. I promise," Alida said soothingly.

He sighed and looked back ahead.

"She must really mean a lot to you, huh?"

He softly sighed and closed his eyes as he clenched his fist. "Yeah," he whispered. "Sorry to bother you."

Alida hummed. "Not at all, dear. What's important is that *you're* okay."

Vilkas lay there as she continued to move her hand slowly over the damp back of his sleep shirt. "Thank you, Alida."

"Hmm-hmm," she chuckled. "You're very welcome, dear. Would you like me to stay with you for a while?"

"Alida."

"Yes, dear?"

"Why does my chest hurt so much?"

"Oh, honey," Alida said painfully as her hand stopped moving. "That means you miss her very much. And you really want to see her again." Her voice began to waver and it sounded like she was sobbing at the end. "It hurts because you hurt. It feels like you'll never see them again."

It sounded like Alida was trying not to cry behind him. He moved his hand and placed it over Alida's.

"Just a little longer," he whispered and grit his teeth to keep from crying himself.

Vilkas heard a soft clicking and it felt like Alida shifted.

"It's alright, mamma," Rochus whispered.

Alida sniffled. "I'm sorry. I feel this sweet boy's pain."

Alida began rubbing his back again as she quietly sobbed. They stayed like that for some time.

"Come on, mamma. Everyone needs their rest now."

"Yeah. Good night, dear."

"Good night," Vilkas said as he put his hand back up under his jaw. Vilkas heard them begin to leave the room. "Thank you."

Vilkas heard them both stop. "You're very welcome, dear."

Vilkas heard the door quietly close.

"Such a sweet boy," Alida sobbed and began to cry as Vilkas heard their bedroom door close.

#####

Vilkas woke up as the sun began to warm the bed. He sat up and stretched to pop a few joints that were stiff. He quietly stepped from the room and smelled something good. It smelled like sweet bread baking.

"Good morning, dear. You're just in time for father's famous sweet toast," Alida said cheerfully from the counter.

"Famous, huh?" Rochus grumbled.

Vilkas made his way to the dining area and watched them prepare it. Alida used a fork to stab a thick slice of bread and laid it in a brownish mixture. She flipped it over and sank it in until it was fully covered. Rochus lifted the pan from the stove and held it over by the mixing bowl. Alida quickly stabbed the bread and it sizzled when it touched the surface. Alida glanced over.

"Would you like to know how to make it?" She asked.

Vilkas took a step forward. "Yeah."

"Come over here and I'll show you."

Vilkas went and stood next to Alida.

"First, you get a loaf of any kind of bread you want. It can be sweet, wheat, sourdough... any kind. We usually slice it thick or, when it soaks up the wash, it tends to pull apart. Then, you make the wash. A few eggs and any seasoning you prefer. I like to add a dash of milk or buttermilk with cinnamon or minced vanilla bean. Mix it together really well and you're done. Use a fork to drop and pick up the bread. Let it soak for a few seconds and put it in the pan until both sides are browned. You can top it with whatever you want. Butter, flavored butter, syrup, fruit or fruit spread. Anything and everything you want."

"I see," Vilkas said and watched the process from start to finish again.

"It's rather quick and easy to make. I'm going to start on some eggs and bacon. How do you like your eggs?"

Vilkas looked at her full of confusion. "I don't understand."

Alida chuckled. "Well, there's scrambled - where you put eggs in a bowl or in the pan and mix it all up. It can come out loose or some like it if it's all together and they can cut into it. If you like yolk, which is good for dipping bread into, we can make it with a soft yolk or if you don't like it runny, you can cook it until it's solid. There are other ways used for fancier times and ways you can make them for other dishes. I prefer scrambled. Father prefers solid yolk with the sweet toast and loose yolk other times."

"I'm... not sure."

"I'll make yours scrambled for now. We can try other ways next time."

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome, dear," Alida said sweetly and smiled warmly with her eyes closed.

Vilkas watched as Alida took pork strips and cooked them. Then he watched her make Rochus' eggs with the pork drippings that were left in the pan and then a larger amount that she scrambled. He watched her sprinkle a bit of seasoning on top. She placed two slices of the toast, eggs and bacon on each plate and brought one to the table.

"Milk or tea to drink, dear?"

"Milk is good. Thank you," Vilkas said as he sat at the table.

She watched as Vilkas grabbed his fork. "Hold on, dear. There's something we like to do here that some don't. But it's important to me that we do it before breakfast and dinner."

"Yeah," Vilkas said and placed his fork back down.

Alida served the other plates and then placed his cup of milk in front of him and tea for herself and Rochus. She finally sat at the table and held out a hand to each Rochus and Vilkas. Vilkas watched as Rochus placed his hand in Alida's. Vilkas followed, but wondered what was about to happen.

"This is just something I thought of when we became parents that I felt would bring us closer together as a family. You may not feel like family, but at least think of us as friends." Alida smiled and squeezed each of their hands. "I just want to say thank you for all that you all do and have done for us. Thank you for this food. Thank you for our new friend. And, let's all get through this day and live it to its fullest with a smile and with kindness in our hearts." Alida squeezed their hands again and let go.

"Let's eat," Rochus said and began dressing his sweet toast.

Vilkas watched as Alida dressed her sweet toast. He wasn't sure how he wanted to have his. He tried a bite first. It was lightly sweet with a hint of a vanilla taste. The outside was a bit dry and tough and a little crunchy on the edges with a chewy inside. He spread some butter on it. It became easier to eat and more delicious. He spread a bit of the syrup on and that made it even sweeter and much easier to swallow. He spread more of the syrup around and dropped some of the strawberry slices on top. He hummed in satisfaction as he chewed the new combination.

"You know, it can be considered a compliment to the chef when you try something before putting dressing and more seasoning on the food," Alida pointed out.

"We fix ours up first because we already know what we like on most things," Rochus added.

"I think I understand," Vilkas said and took another bite of the sweet toast.

He wasn't in favor of the syrup mixing with the eggs. By themselves, this way of fixing eggs was still delicious. It gave them a nice yellow color and you didn't need to worry about mopping up the yolk with bread. Because it was cooked in the same pan as the pork strips - 'bacon', as Alida called it - there was the flavor of the salt and smoke mixed in.

"This is all very delicious," Vilkas said as he started having to will himself not to stuff it all in his mouth at once.

"Flatterer," Rochus muttered, yet smiled.

Alida chuckled with the closed eyes and sweet smile of hers. Vilkas noticed she did that a lot. It seemed like a signature response with her.

"I think after breakfast, you and I should get changed and head over to the work site. We'll let them know that we won't be able to help out today," Alida said, directing her words at Vilkas. "We stopped working early yesterday since Tangi closed the pub and dinner wouldn't be delivered."

"I'll come along, too. Stretch my legs a little," Rochus chimed in.

"That'll be lovely, father. Don't push yourself too hard, now."

"Oh please. It'll take a lot more than a few steps to keep this old man down."

"Such a talker. I'm sure everyone will be glad to see you out and about."

"It's not every day I get to tell everyone the village savior is stay-..."

"No!" Vilkas shouted as his eyes snapped to Rochus. He sighed and looked at his plate. "Sorry. Just...not yet."

"Huuh?" Rochus questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Father, I think he hinted at it yesterday. He wants to feel and act like a regular person. If we allow people to mob him in his current state, it’ll only do more harm than good to the sweet boy. I think he’ll let us know when it’s time to open up.”

“Hmm,” Rochus hummed and appeared to think. “Yeah. You’re right, mamma. I seem to have forgotten already. Even being prepared for it, I know how stressful it is when everyone’s surrounding you,” he said and tapped his prosthetic foot on the floor.

“Mmm-hmm,” Alida confirmed. “Don’t worry, dear. Our lips are sealed.”

Vilkas looked up at her with his head tilted in confusion.

Alida chuckled. “Oh, dear, you melt my heart when you look at me like that. So adorable.” Alida chuckled again and composed herself. “It just means we won’t tell anyone your secret. A figure of speech. We aren’t actually going to seal our lips. But I saw the gears turning in your eyes. Um...meaning it looked like you were thinking about what I said and thought you knew the answer but needed to confirm it.”

“A lot in life is just ‘common sense’,” Rochus added. “You seem like a smart kid. I think you know more than you give yourself credit for. True - you didn’t have a reason to learn or remember a lot of things. But, you seem sharp. I bet you can see something once and do it yourself about as well. With some practice, you’ll have it down pat. Your manners are spot on for not needing them during battle.”

“Very true. For someone that says they’ve only fought others his entire life, you’re very kind and courteous compared to some of the braggarts over at Tangi’s pub.”

“Absolutely. Anyone can swing a sword. Not everyone can show respect.”

Alida hummed in agreement. Vilkas finished first. He collected his dirty dishes and utensils and brought them to the wash basin. The setup was similar to Shari’s. He began drawing water into the basin.

“Dear, what are you doing?” Alida asked calmly in surprise and pushed away from the table.

“Payment for the food and bed,” Vilkas said with a nod.

Alida walked over and looked up at him with scolding eyes, but a pleased smile. “No you don’t,” she said and wrapped her soft hands around his thick forearm. She

tugged on his arm. "There's a bath waiting for you. You don't have time for this. Now come-come."

"But..."

"No buts. Mamma's orders."

Alida walked by his side with his arm in tow towards the washroom. She opened the door and gave his back a gentle push.

"Go on, now. I have a change of clothes ready for you, too."

Vilkas looked down by the towel rack and saw folded up was a new set of clothes. He turned and looked at her with the tilted head in confusion.

"You're welcome, dear," she said with her signature look.

He remembered Seppo saying Alida was the one who made his other clothes. It explained the conversation about them, too. "Thank you. And thank you for the other clothes as well."

"My pleasure. With how stained our clothes get working, I thought you might appreciate a few changes of clothes. My way of thanking you for your help. Now, get in the bath and wash away that sweat you slept in." Alida closed the door.

The smell was different from Shari's. It smelled like the forest. He pulled off the finger bandages and tossed them in the waste bin. As he washed, he noticed there were two kinds of soap. When he picked up one, it smelled of flowers. The other smelled like a tree scent. He washed off and toweled dry. The clothes fit much like the others with the chest fitting better than the previous set. He folded his night wear and walked out of the washroom to place it on his knapsack. He grabbed his cap, sling and sleeve. When he walked out into the dining area, the other two were finishing up the dishes. He placed the items in his hand on the table.

"How does it fit, dear?" Alida asked as she dried her hands.

"It feels good."

"Hmm," she hummed and brought a hand up to her jaw. "I guessed on your proportions. I took what you said and opened the chest a bit. I can mend your other shirt

to loosen it up a bit.” She mumbled something to herself. “And we’ll need to wash your sleepwear. I’ll take you to the laundry later.”

Vilkas nodded and put on the cap, then the sleeve. Alida walked over and tied up the sling.

“We’re done with dishes. Ready to go, father?” She asked as she turned towards Rochus.

Rochus appeared to pop something into his mouth and took a long drink from a cup. “All set,” he said and placed the cup next to the wash basin.

Alida turned to Vilkas. “Just something to help with the pain, dear.”

Vilkas nodded. He thought that it must be painful to walk on a slab of wood regardless of how well it was crafted and padded.

Rochus grabbed a walking cane and they made their way out the door and down the street. People started setting up their shops and visitors were starting to make their way into town. The villagers greeted and waved at them as they passed with the panthers greeting and waving back. Vilkas could see their eyes narrow when they caught sight of him. He tried to give a bit of a smile to them. They would nod and give a bit of a smile back.

When they got to the intersection, they paused so Rochus could stretch his back. Vilkas couldn’t help but stare down the right path - his covered ear lowered against his head. Alida grabbed his hand gently. He looked over at her smiling face. She patted his hand with her free hand and let go as they began to trek towards the work site.

“Haven’t been out in a while. Things are coming along nicely,” Rochus commented.

“Yes. Everyone is working very hard to get things back to normal. The first two families have already moved in. Construction is going so fast that another two were taken from the cleanup and added to the material gathering. Seppo spent yesterday in his shop making nails and braces.”

“Still say that sly foreigner should be the village head.”

“There’s always time to convince him until the next election.”

Vilkas could see the clean-up was starting on the last house in the row. The previous site still needed to be cleaned before the floors came out. Construction was beginning on the fourth house and the roof was being put on the third.

“Rochus! You grumpy bastard! Good to see ya!” One of the older construction workers on the roof called out. “Alida, darling, I don’t know how you put up with that one! Haw-haw-haw!”

Rochus shook his fist at the man and grumbled.

“Good morning!” Alida called back. “Still a blushing maiden!”

Several of the crew members stopped working to harass Rochus and greet Alida. Vilkas saw a familiar feline stand up and turn towards them from the flooring of the seventh site. His eyes grew big and he jumped out from the floor pit and quickly walked towards the three.

“Morning, love,” Seppo said and leaned in gave Alida a kiss on the cheek. She cooed as he stepped over to Rochus. They gave each other a firm handshake. “Good to see you out and about.”

“Good to see you, friend. Those lips should keep to themselves,” Rochus gruffly stated.

“Ha-ha! Can’t help but appreciate beauty.”

“Mum’s the word if they talk you into being village head.”

“My lips are my own then, friend...but you,” Seppo said and became serious as he looked over at Vilkas. “May I have a moment in private?”

Seppo stepped over to Vilkas and led him from the panthers. He seemed to be glancing around until they stopped.

“Where’s Shari?” Seppo asked with concern in a hushed tone.

Vilkas looked down at the ground. “I...had to break my promise. I didn’t have a say. Tangi...”

Seppo growled and paced around with his hands in fists with a pained expression. He stopped in front of Vilkas and dropped his hands. His expression grew

to be very serious to the point of anger. He pointed a finger at Vilkas and claimed it back in his fist. As he shook it, he seemed to become angrier.

“They know...Seppo.”

Seppo's expression slowly morphed to shock.

“I didn't have a choice. I didn't know where you lived and I had nowhere else to go. I couldn't see a way to hide it from them. I didn't know how long I was going to be with them.”

“I see,” Seppo said, his expression returning to normal.

“They're very kind. Alida said she'll help me and I can stay with them until I can see Shari again.”

Seppo breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

“Friend, I'm so glad you went to them. Fine people, that lot. Not my place to say, but I'm sure Alida's happy to have a son in her house since...well,” Seppo said and became mournful as he looked at the ground. “They lost their son in the raid. Grown man, but still...the loss hit Alida terribly. That smile hides so much pain. A parent shouldn't outlive their children.” He looked up at Vilkas. “Treat them well, yeah? Listen to her first and speak later...though you're already versed in that regard.”

Vilkas nodded as Seppo spoke. “I understand.”

“By the by, how'd that scar get opened up and why's your eye puffy?”

Vilkas looked straight-faced at the lynx.

“A misunderstanding. But now he and Valeska know as well.”

“VITUN PASKA!!” Seppo shouted and became visibly irate.

Work stopped and eyes fell upon them. Seppo walked hurriedly over to the ruined house next to them and pounded a fist on one of the outer wall supports. It toppled over and crashed into the rest of the debris. Seppo paced around with his hands on his hips until he stopped in front of Vilkas again.

“Hyvin tehty for not killing that blockhead. However,” Seppo said and sighed.

“Shari told me. I understand.”

Seppo glanced away. He scrunched his mouth to one side and nodded. “Tch.” He looked back at Vilkas. “So do I. I don’t have to like it. Especially when you out yourself and he still kicks you to the street. Tch. I’ll speak with him. No promises, ystävä.”

“It’s okay. Shari needs to work. Alida is kind and will help me. I think it’ll be better this way.”

Seppo’s eyes narrowed.

Vilkas looked to the ground. “I feel shame I broke our promise. It hurt when she called for me as I left. It hurts more because I feel I lost my only...my good friend.” The pain and pressure filled his chest.

“Not true. Friends confide in each other. A friend of Shari’s is a friend of mine. I know *you*. Alida and Rochus know *you*. You still have Shari even if you can’t see her. You have friends, ystävä.”

Vilkas looked up at Seppo. He sighed quietly and nodded. “I understand.”

Seppo smiled. “Right.” He pointed off to the right. “My shop’s there. My house is behind it.”

Vilkas traced his finger to the second building from the intersection on the left side. Smoke billowed out from the building next to it. “Must be the other smithy,” he thought and looked back at Seppo.

“You need anything...*anything*...you find me.”

“Understood.”

Seppo smiled and clapped his hand on Vilkas’ shoulder. “I won’t keep you any longer then. Take care, friend.”

“You as well...friend. Thank you,” Vilkas said and smiled.

Seppo nodded and walked to the panthers. After a bit of back-and-forth, Alida and Rochus walked to Vilkas.

“Seppo gave us an idea of what he discussed with you,” Alida said. “Let’s get father home and get started on helping you, dear.”

“Yeah.”

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