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

Chapter 18. "Shari's Livid"

Rochus really started to slow down after they turned the corner from the intersection. He toughed it out until they got home when he collapsed in one of the sitting room chairs. Alida went to the kitchen and Vilkas sat at the table.

"Doing okay, father?" Alida asked as she placed a bit more wood into the stove.

"Yeah, I'm alright. It felt good to get out there," Rochus said as he took off his prosthetic.

It was held on to his leg with two straps that connected to a wide strap with a buckle. The part that touched his leg was well padded. Vilkas wanted to make conversation and ask about it, but decided against it since he didn't want to potentially anger Rochus. It would be like asking about his arm. Sure he didn't mind the looks and the questions, but after so many years of it, it can get annoying.

Alida took a cup of tea and Rochus' book and set them down on the table next to him. He thanked her and sipped the tea as he opened the book. There was writing on the cover. It all looked like random scribbles. He caught Alida's gaze.

"Does reading interest you, dear? We have a few books if you'd like to read for a bit."

Vilkas was wondering when this would come up. He was happy and a little frightened by how soon it did. "I don't know how."

Alida pressed her lips together and nodded shallowly. "I see. Be right back, dear."

"Come here for a second, son," Rochus said quietly.

Rochus made a motion with two fingers. Vilkas was hesitant, but made his way over and leaned in.

"I don't know how much you know about things around here. But, we lost our son the night of the attack. Do this old man a favor and don't say anything about it to mom. We both took it hard, but she's still crying behind that smile. If it feels like you're being

treated like a kid or if she calls you her son, smile and say nothing. You understand, right?" Rochus spoke in a very hushed tone. It was a serious tone, but felt lighthearted.

"I think I understand," Vilkas quietly said and nodded.

"Thank you in advance, my boy." Rochus smiled and returned to his book.

"Isn't that what you're doing as well when you call me 'son'?" Vilkas thought as he sat back in his chair.

Alida made her way back to the table and placed down a couple of books, paper and a fountain pen. She made a couple more cups of tea and sat down. Vilkas took the time to take off the disguise and placed it in his room.

She began with a quick breakdown. Lines making letters, letters making words, words making sentences, and so on. She explained the different types of words such as nouns and verbs. Alida opened up a book and turned it towards Vilkas and began explaining how lines make a letter depending on how it's drawn. She showed him how to use the fountain pen - which was just a wooden stick with a metal point for all he knew. It was balanced rather well. He thought it could be used for a throwing knife in certain situations.

After dipping the pen into the ink and tapping it gently, he brought the pen to the paper. Alida traced her finger above where he was moving the pen to mock the motion of writing the first letter. He brought his right hand up and placed it on the paper to hold it still when she moved her hand away so he could write the letter a few more times on his own. They repeated this process for several more letters.

Vilkas could feel a dull ache rising in his head. He placed the pen in the holder next to the inkwell and rubbed his eyes.

"Would you like to take a break, dear?" Alida asked.

"Sorry. It takes more focus to do new things using my hands. I'm not left-handed after all," Vilkas said and glanced over at her.

She had her signature smile on display. "I guess that never crossed my mind when you told us what happened to your arm." She looked at him as if she had an idea. "How much can you use your hand?"

Vilkas turned over his hand and curled his fingers into a crescent shape. He moved his elbow as much as he could. "That's as far as they move. Most of the movement is in my shoulder."

"Let's try something," Alida said and got up.

Alida went into a small crate next to one of the sitting chairs. Inside were various bolts of cloth, spools of thread and various other items she used to make clothes. She

pulled out a short length of rope used in trouser ties. She came over to Vilkas and stood next to him. She placed the pen into his right hand and curled his thumb and first two fingers onto the pen. She tied his fingers to the pen.

“Try writing like that. I don’t want you to stress over this. It’s important to learn, but it makes it less enjoyable to learn new things if it causes your head to ache.”

“Yeah,” Vilkas said and turned over his hand.

Writing itself didn’t take much motion. He finished the first four letters he learned rather quickly. They weren’t as neat as with his left hand, but something about it did feel more natural. He smiled as he watched his hand glide through more letters.

“GAH!!!” Vilkas shouted in pain and slammed his left hand against his forehead.

“Are you alright, dear?!” Alida cried as she grabbed his hand and placed the other on his back.

Images flooded into his head. The setting was different. The letters were different. The instruments and process were very similar.

Vilkas moved his left hand to the paper and began to write. His hand wrote onto the paper letters that looked nothing like the ones he was learning. He wrote them in a smaller and a larger fashion until twenty-six were upon the paper. He began to breathe heavily as he moved his hand from the paper. Alida leaned in and stared at the paper with her mouth agape.

“Vil-kas...what...is this?” She asked in wonderment.

“I’m not sure,” he said as his breathing slowed to normal. “This has happened before. I get a sharp pain in my head and...I remember things. I want to tell Shari. I want to tell her about all the times it has happened. She was concerned when it happened when I was helping her once. But she checked me out after it happened and found nothing wrong.”

Alida continued to stare at the paper while tilting her head both ways. “I’ve never seen writing like this before.” She pulled away and turned to Vilkas. “Where did you learn this?”

Vilkas shook his head and looked over at her. “I don-...I don’t know. I just...remember doing things like this as if I’ve done them before. Preparing food, cleaning the house and now...this.”

Alida placed her left hand on his forehead and used a finger to pull down on one of his eyelids as she leaned in with squinted eyes.

“You look and feel normal,” she said and reclaimed her hands. “I would say you’re bringing back memories you’ve hidden for so long, but I’ve never heard of it

causing pain. And this," she said as she looked at the paper. "This is nothing I've seen before. Perhaps you learned this with your mother in another country?"

"I don't know," he said as he looked at the table. "There are few memories I have of her. These random pains don't feel like they happened when I was with her."

"It's alright, dear. You were very young. Even I can only remember a few things from being young with my parents."

"Most days it's hard to remember what happened yesterday when you get as old as us," Rochus added.

Alida chuckled. "That's very true. We tend to remember the really good or really bad things that happen to us. Everything else gets filtered out after a while, I suppose." Alida untied Vilkas' fingers. "Let's take a break. We'll go to the laundry house and give your mind a rest."

"Yeah," Vilkas said and looked at the paper again. "Let's take a break."

Alida went into her bedroom and Vilkas went into his. He placed his dirty clothes on the floor and looked in his knapsack to see if he'd forgotten anything. His hand brushed across some paper. He pulled out the paper and looked at it. It was one of the notes Shari had written. He looked through and pulled out the other notes.

He grabbed his clothes, the disguise and the letters and brought them out to the table. Alida walked behind him with a larger, rectangular wicker basket that had straps on it. She placed his clothes in the basket as he looked at the letters.

"What do you have there?" She asked as she stood next to him.

"Shari wrote these. She was mad at me for not reading them. She didn't know that I couldn't."

"I see." Alida leaned in. She began to read the letters out loud.

Vilkas,

I left to go pick up some food for dinner. I will be back in a bit.

Shari.

Vilkas placed the letter down and unfolded the next.

Vilkas,

I was disappointed you left. That means I'm a bit mad and a bit sad. Your injuries are NOT fully healed. Though, I'm happy you want to help with the cleanup. Please, do not overdo it.

What really upsets me is you not coming home back after working. I had to lie to my friend just to make sure you were eating. And then I saw you look at the house, then turned and walked the other way.

I'm really trying not to be mad. Please come back here so I know you're okay.

Shari.

Vilkas picked up the last one.

I'm so frustrated with you right now. You're going to get sick. It's cold at night and it's going to rain any day. Your body isn't as strong as you think it is right now.

I promise I won't get mad at you if you come back here. I can't keep bringing you food and towels every night.

PLEASE COME HOME!!!

Vilkas placed the letters back in his pack. He didn't know what to say or think about them.

"She was very concerned about you," Alida said as he came back in the room.

"Yeah. I don't know if I would have done anything different. I didn't make our promise until after I was ill." He looked at the floor, his tone more somber. "Seems I only get injured, then make her angry."

"Well, son, if they care enough about you, that anger is concern," Rochus added.

"That's true," Alida said. "I was concerned about father, then I was angry with him when he lost his leg. It wasn't that I was angry with him exactly, it's just I was angry that it happened - especially to someone I loved. I think Shari was concerned about you, then angry with you, not only since you left her when you weren't healthy, but also because you were hurting worse when you came back. And I bet she's a bit of both because you left again when you're hurting - though not by choice. But, she cares about you. Does that make sense, dear?"

Vilkas looked up at her. "She likes me and I," he said and looked back down. "I like her," he muttered.

Alida hummed a chuckle. "I see. You...care about each other. That's what *friends* do."

He glanced over at her. Alida wore her signature smile, but it seemed...different.

"That's all fine and dandy," Rochus piped up. "Laundry won't do itself."

Alida leaned in and whispered, "Father's not one for too much sappy talk."

Rochus grumbled and Alida giggled.

"Let's get going, dear. We can talk more when we get there."

"Yeah," he said and grabbed the clothes basket.

"Dear! You don't have to," Alida said while she held her hands out as he pulled the straps over his left shoulder.

"No," he said and turned towards the door. "I have to earn my keep somehow."

"Attaboy," Rochus called as Vilkas walked through the door.

"Such a sweet boy," Alida muttered and followed behind him. "OH! YOUR DISGUISE!"

Vilkas winced when he realized he wasn't covered. He sighed and felt angry at himself. Alida helped him cover up and they were finally on their way.

They traveled to the other side of the town. There were a few stalls open with some fruits available after Seppo's shop and the blacksmith. The second to last business had a tooth cutout hung by the door with the doctor's name etched in it. That must've been the dentist Shari mentioned.

They turned right down a dirt path after the dentist. He could smell various scents in different strengths. The shop itself was rather large. Inside had tables next to large wash basins. To the right he could see a room where they made bars of soap with a small counter to purchase them just outside the door. Next to that was an area with a sign behind it. Possibly for a drop-off service. Towards the back, tucked in the corner, were two stacks of buckets and a water spout. There was an open door going out the back where lines for hanging clothes to dry were.

Vilkas sneezed and covered his nose to lessen the assault of scent.

"Everything alright, dear?"

"Yeah. Smell is strong."

"You think so?" Alida said in disbelief. She audibly sniffed a few times. "You must have a powerful sniffer. I suppose it can be a bit much for some folks. I know father doesn't much care for it. To each their own."

Alida guided him over to a table so he could set down the basket. She showed him how to draw water from the spout. He's used one of these before.

A crank attached to a paddle wheel pulls water in through a pipe connected to the river. It wasn't always effective, but one could usually get enough water for basic

needs. It doesn't work during the cold months, either. Special tanks are used to store water for those times.

Vilkas carried the water bucket over to a wash basin. Alida showed him how to properly wash the types of clothing - especially which are okay to scrub on the washboard. She then showed him how to lather stains and let them sit to get most of them out. It was much like washing dishes.

Alida had washed a few items and took him out the back door to hang the items for drying.

"Pretty simple, isn't it?" She asked as she pinned a shirt up.

"Yeah. It is."

"Would you like me to ask if you can watch them make soap?"

"Yeah."

Alida led him into the small room. Vilkas was welcomed in and was shown the process. She left him in the room to continue the washing.

They started with taking the slabs of fat from feral cows and grinding it up. They then let it cook for several hours. After cooking it, they strain it into a bowl where they mix in oil from olives. They make that by washing olives from one of the crops, smashing them, add a bit of water, use a mortar and pestle to grind it, then strain that through a thin cloth. They add water and a mixture from a perfumer. After mixing all of that, it sits for a few weeks when it gets cut into bars. They explained how more or different oils and grains can be added for different benefits.

"Alida!"

Vilkas felt like he'd died and his ghost was before him. He began to breathe heavily in panic - though he wasn't sure why. "Not now," he thought.

"Vilkas?" One of the attendants called out as he grabbed his chest.

"Please! I beg you. I'm not here," he said as he slowly backed to the wall by the entrance to the partition.

"Alida, have you seen Vilkas?" Shari asked as she walked into the building.

"Ahh, I see," the attendant whispered and winked with a sly smile.

"Shari! How are you doing, dear? I heard you weren't feeling well," Alida replied.

"I'd feel better if I knew where that damn wolf ran off to," Shari said angrily.

"I'm sure he's doing okay, dear."

“rrrAAAAAAhhh!” Shari screamed.

“Damn! What’d you do to her? I’ve never heard her yell like that,” the attendant said in a hush with a shocked expression.

“Please, be quiet,” Vilkas mouthed back. He continued his labored breathing and began to sweat.

“Shari, dear, please calm down,” Alida said sweetly.

“I can’t calm down! That asshole father of mine drove my patient out and I can’t find him.” Shari’s voice began to quiver. “I feel like my family betrayed me. I blew up on them and made them leave my house this morning. I’ve been trying to find him. I’m worried about him.”

“Come here, dear.” They became quiet for a moment. “I’m sure he’s doing alright.” Alida became quiet. “He’s survived this long on his own.”

Shari gasped. “How do you know?” She asked with her own hushed tone.

They began talking quieter than Vilkas’ ears could pick up. He tried to hold his breath because of how quiet it got. Some of the attendants gathered at the entrance so even the sound of the work being done made it very quiet. If he breathed like his lungs wanted him to, that would surely be heard by anyone here.

“Well,” Shari finally said. “If you see him, tell him I changed my plans and will be going to Namal Lu for a few days. If he’s not back in the clinic by then, I’m done with him, too.”

“If I see him, I will, dear,” Alida replied.

The attendants slowly filtered back to their work stations.

“What on earth did you do for Shari to be so mad?” The attendant asked. “And to hear she told that grumpy shithead off...”

“I’d rather not talk about it. As her friend, I can’t,” Vilkas said as his body calmed down.

“Oh. A fight among friends? Just make sure you talk to her when she comes back. That’s one lady you want on your side,” the attendant said and walked back to his work station.

“Yeah,” Vilkas said and peeked out from the doorway.

It seemed Shari was gone. He made his way out from the partition and stood next to Alida.

Alida greeted him with her signature smile. "Shari's livid, but don't worry, dear," she said quietly. "She knows you're with us."

Vilkas looked in the wash basin and saw his other tunic was on the washboard.

"Is this okay?"

Alida giggled. "It's fine, dear. I told her everything that happened." Alida began scrubbing the soot from the tunic. "She's hurt, but she understands. I have you for a few more days, then you can go see her. I'll go with you if it will make the transition easier for you."

"Thank you, Alida," he said and managed a smile.

"You're welcome. Such a sweet boy," she said and giggled.

As the time went by, Alida had him wash some of the clothing. He was getting used to how much pressure to put on certain articles of clothing. By the time they were done, he had a good idea of how to properly wash tunics, trousers and undergarments. Alida had a good laugh when he had no problem with washing her brassier. He didn't understand what all the fuss was about.

After washing, they went back home for lunch. The consensus was that everyone was only slightly peckish from breakfast. Vilkas helped Alida chop up some vegetables for a salad. Instead of a vinaigrette, Alida tossed the greens and veggies with olive oil. Vilkas found this to be tasty as well.

Alida helped Vilkas with learning some more of the letters. He went back to using his left hand. Keeping his right hand bound like that didn't seem practical in the long run. On the way to pick up the drying laundry, Alida tested him with reading some of the signs on the buildings and vendor postings. He didn't quite understand the words on some signs, but he was picking out the letters very well.

They arrived at the laundry and she showed him how to properly fold the clothes. She folded his old tunic and trousers last and placed them on top so she could alter them when they got back home.

While Alida altered his clothes, he continued working on reading and writing the letters. By the time she was done, he had - at least competently - written every letter at least twenty times. After some praise and a tea break, she began sounding out the letters to him. This was much easier. By the time dinner was being prepared, he could read, write, and sound out the letters.

For dinner, they had pasta with a tomato sauce and cut up grilled sausages as well as a side of toasted, garlic buttered bread. Alida, once again, had everyone join hands.

"Tonight, I want to thank both of you for another lovely day. May our friends and extended family fill themselves as we fill ourselves with love and a meal."

Vilkas tried the pasta with a chunk of the sausage. It made him close his eyes and hum. Alida chuckled to herself and Rochus just grinned. He wanted to try the cheese with it, too.

"Father can get chest pains with this meal, so I serve him milk with it. It helps to settle down his stomach for the night. If you feel the same, the milk is in the cooler, dear," Alida said as she sprinkled cheese on top of her pasta.

"Speaking of chest pains," Rochus chimed in as he sprinkled shredded cheese over his pasta. "I had a chat with Shari."

Vilkas felt his heart sink into his stomach.

"She stopped by the laundry, too," Alida said after swallowing.

"She was hotter than a branding iron. I wanted no part of it so I sent her to you."

"So that's why she stopped by. I thought it was an odd place to be looking for Vilkas."

"I don't think I've ever seen her that angry. And to tell off that hard-ass of a father..."

"Rochus!" Alida admonished him, but couldn't help her lips from curling into a smile. "Be that as it may, it's still her father." Alida sighed as she stabbed some of the flat noodle strips and twirled. "I just wonder which of the two were crushed more by that whole ordeal."

"Sounds like a three-way bugger up, if you ask me."

"That's true. Our so-..."

Alida stopped twirling her pasta. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together.

"Mamma," Rochus said and leaned over to rub her back.

"I'm fine, father," she said quietly as she brought her free hand up to her mouth.

Vilkas stopped eating as well. Rochus reached over and caught a tear that made its way down her cheek. Vilkas wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew it wasn't a happy moment. After a few minutes, Alida composed herself and looked over at Vilkas.

"I'm sorry, dear. I know you aren't my son, but I find myself loving you no less than one."

"It's okay. I understand," he said and gave her a slight smile.

"Shari said you had a golden heart with a golden tongue. You're such a sweet boy. I find myself wishing we'd met sooner in life."

"I don't think that would have turned out like you'd hoped," Vilkas said quietly as he remembered the countless women he'd slain through the years. "Giving myself over to death is the only reason I softened. I fear you would've met the end of my blade before the end of your first smile - sweet as it may be."

"I suppose you're right."

The remainder of the meal was rather somber. Vilkas felt he was to blame. It nagged at the back of his mind and inside his chest. It made him feel even worse because it was all very good.

Vilkas looked over at Alida. She looked back at him with an unnaturally blank face. It made him hurt even more. He wanted to see her smile. He forced, then found his lips pulling into a natural smile.

"Dinner was very delicious. Thank you."

The smile slowly made its way back onto Alida's face. "You're very welcome, dear."

After dinner, Vilkas again tried to wash the dishes and was shooed away by Alida. Instead, she showed him a simple dictionary. He spent the time looking up words that Shari had used and explained to him. He found himself smiling as he started putting all the letters together in the definition to form the words. Then he'd read it back again and find that she was almost perfect with every explanation.

After a few words, he had to put the book down. He would read the word and the definition only to remember that moment with her. It began to make him sadder and sadder with each word. He leaned back in the chair and sighed heavily.

"I'll be able to see her in three days," he thought and felt slightly better.

"Are you okay, dear?" Alida asked as she dried her hands.

"Yeah. I was looking up words Shari taught me...and..."

Alida hung up the towel and walked over behind him. She wrapped her arms around just under his neck and placed her jaw on his head. "It's okay, dear. A couple short days and you'll see her again. Until then..." Alida extended her claws and gently scratched his chest. "You're stuck with me and father."

Alida giggled and brought her hands up to his shoulders. She sighed and kissed the back of his head before moving back over by the cooler.

"Mamma...something you want to tell me?" Rochus questioned with a playful tone.

The panthers exchanged a kiss. "Nothing and no one can take my eyes off of you," she said and giggled.

"I'll tear this leg off and beat anything and anyone that does."

Alida cooed and they kissed again. Vilkas wasn't sure what his feelings were at the moment. He remembered Shari kissing him and how that felt. It wasn't real. He tried to suppress the desire to do it for real.

He picked up the dictionary and found his finger passing over the L's. He read the definition over and over. Every letter of every word. Every usage of the word. He closed the book and closed his eyes. He sighed with a slight groan escaping his throat.

"Sorry, father. I may have been wrong. I'm going to tend to our guest. Would you mind making the tea for tonight?" Alida whispered.

"Not at all, my love."

Alida made her way over to the table and sat across from Vilkas.

"Would you maybe want to talk, dear?" She asked sweetly. "Something troubling you more than just missing Shari? Or, maybe, you need me to clear something up for you?"

He sat forward and placed the book on the table. He placed his elbow on the table and placed his nose in his palm as he closed his eyes. He tapped his finger on the top of his muzzle and sighed. He opened his eyes and laid his arm on the table.

"Shari told me what it means, and...I've looked the word up," he began. He closed his mouth and clenched his jaw. "Do you think it's possible...I'm in love with Shari?"

Alida's eyes grew wide and her smile disappeared. She pressed her lips together and they stretched into a smile as her eyes narrowed. "How do you feel, dear? With what you know, is that how you feel towards her?"

"Yes," he said, then looked down at the table. "And no." He gently chattered his teeth and sighed through his nose. "I've never loved anyone before. I never even looked at anyone that way. Except my mother...but, that was my mother. I'm just afraid I've fallen in love with the first person I didn't consider an enemy. I'm afraid that, even if I really do have honest feelings for her, she doesn't feel the same way. I don't want to

hurt her. I want to protect her. I want to talk to her more and more every day. I enjoy every minute I get to spend with her. I don't want that to end."

"Sounds like love to me," Rochus intruded.

Alida hummed a sigh. "I agree. I think you genuinely love that girl. First loves can be the most difficult and trying. It's difficult because of that uncertainty of not knowing if the other person feels the same way. It's trying if that person isn't, what we call, 'the one'. Meaning: The person you marry, have a family with and spend your aging days with. Everyone remembers their first love. Not everyone remembers the one after that. The first and last will always hold special places in our hearts. There is no definitive book on love. The only thing you can do is tell her how you feel. After that, it's on the other person as to how they feel. If they feel the same, it's a relief. If not, it hurts."

Rochus placed cups of tea in front of Alida and placed a kiss on top of her head. He placed the other cup in front of Vilkas before grabbing his cup and sitting in his reading chair.

"I can't speak for her, but that girl feels something for you. I think she's struggling inside. Everyone has preconceived notions of what they want in a relationship. That means expectations or, um, views of what they want out of the one they love. You're a rare one. You don't have that. I think that's why she calls you golden-tongued or golden-hearted. Your love is very pure. You have no expectations of her. If she's not the one, that may change for you."

Alida took a sip of her tea before she continued. "I think she's really struggling because of what happened with her first love. I think she's more afraid of loving you than you are of loving her." She took another sip of her tea. "I don't think there's much more I can say about this. It's up to you and her now."

Vilkas took a sip of his tea. It tasted faintly of apple and sweetened with honey. It had a soothing taste compared to the tea Shari had. "She told me about the last patient she had feelings for. She told me she can't feel love for me because I'm her patient. And...I'm doing my best not to feel that way towards her. But...it's very difficult."

He looked up as Alida stretched her hand across the table. He placed his hand in hers and she gently squeezed.

"The more you think about it, the more it will trouble you. The more it troubles you, the more it'll hurt. Whether that hurt is painful due to happiness or sadness...only time will tell. All you can do is be honest with her and tell her how you feel. If she accepts you, treat her well and love her with all your heart. If she denies you, treat her as a friend no different than you are now. Does that make sense?"

Vilkas nodded. "I think I understand."

Alida squeezed his hand again and let go. “Let’s sit for a moment so you can digest everything. Then, let’s try some math.”

Vilkas smiled warmly. “Yeah. Thank you, Alida.”

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