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

Chapter 20. “Hero”

Vilkas awoke feeling better than he had the previous nights. Despite his thoughts still being stuck on Shari, he got plenty of sleep.

“Good morning, dear,” Alida said as he made his way out to the dining table.

“Good morning, Alida...Rochus,” he said and took his seat.

“Morning, son. Ready to head back to work?” Rochus asked from the stove.

Vilkas looked from Rochus to Alida.

She smiled and brought over a cup of tea. “I think you’re ready, dear. Tonight, we can go over some more things. Tomorrow, I’ll send you on your way back to Shari with a few books so you can continue to study. But I’m not sure I can teach you anything more. You’re a smart boy. So sweet and honest. I think you’ll do well on your own. If you have any questions, you know where to find me.”

He felt his ear drop to his head. He felt sad. He sighed and smiled, then looked up at Alida. “If you feel I’m ready, I’ll do my best not to fail you.”

“I don’t think you can, dear,” Alida said and flashed her signature smile. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

Alida returned to help Rochus with breakfast. After the plates were placed, they sat and they all held hands.

“I’m thankful for having my husband by my side. I’m thankful for our new family member. I’m thankful for the meal we’re about to have. I hope we can accept another

day with a smile and love in our hearts. I pray we make it through the day happy and healthy. Thank you both for blessing me with your love.”

After breakfast, Vilkas and Alida changed and made their way to the work site. They were both greeted warmly by everyone as they passed by.

“Alida! Vilkas!” Seppo called and walked toward them. “Aamu! Good to see you both.”

“Good morning, Seppo,” Alida said and gave him a hug.

“Good morning,” Vilkas said and shook Seppo’s hand.

“Well, I moved some able bodies to construction again so we’ll be glad to have you both on cleanup. We’re focusing more on getting the homes rebuilt. The shop owners aren’t very happy, but we need to get them back in their homes.”

“I agree,” Alida said. “They’re doing fine with sharing the work space. I think everyone will agree once they’re back home, sleeping in their own beds at night.”

“Well said, rakas. Let’s get to it, shall we?”

Floors were being put in the sixth house while the previous house was getting the roof put on. Some movers were hauling furniture into the last house they finished. Vilkas saw the second charred lumber pile was about half the size of the full one and it looked like the debris pit was dug out several times.

It was himself and Alida with Seppo and two others working on the cleanup. The crew was half of what it was when he started. The cleanup was still two houses faster than the construction. Vilkas helped Seppo with pulling up the flooring of the last house they cleaned.

It was his first time seeing the pipes under the flooring for the food coolers and the wastewater. The process was lost on him, but the wastewater had something to do with the ‘S’ shape of the pipe with a siphon on the other end and the cooler had a spiral water wheel that pumped cool water from the ground into the cooler itself. It didn’t keep the food very cold, but it would last a few days without rotting. Ice and snow was used in

the winter months to keep food for up to a week. Trying to think about how any of it worked just hurt his head.

Seppo kept quiet for most of their time together. Other than explaining how the waste and cooler systems worked, he mentioned having a heated discussion with Tangi. While he understood Tangi's anger, he didn't agree with the method he used when approaching it because it wasn't like the situation with his son and Shari. He agreed it was just a misunderstanding and left it at that.

They had the floor almost finished when it was lunch time. Alida walked with him to eat with the others. Valeska made eye contact, but didn't speak to him. It made him feel angry seeing her, but he did his best to remain under control. It helped having Alida there with him. She just placed her hand on his arm and he felt at ease.

He still felt uneasy sitting at the table with the others. Everyone else was laughing and talking amongst themselves while he stayed quiet. He talked with Alida when she talked with him, but he mostly just observed. They really did seem like good people.

"Vilkas."

He immediately felt anger rise within him. Lunch was wrapping up and Valeska was there to collect the plates and platters. He looked over at her with as calm a face as he could. He couldn't keep his eye from twitching.

"Can I...talk to you...in private? It'll only take a minute." Her face looked sad, but she maintained eye contact.

"Go ahead, dear," Alida said as she gently rubbed his back.

It calmed him down. He wished Alida would go with him. He had no idea what was about to happen.

"Socorro is playing with his friends, so don't worry about running into him right now," she said as she led him away from the group.

She stopped a ways away from the others. She looked at him and breathed in. She let out her breath slowly as she began to fiddle with her fingers by her stomach. It reminded him of how Shari acted when speaking seriously.

"I just want to," she began and sighed. She looked up at him. "I want to say I'm sorry for how myself and my father acted the other night. I don't know if Shari or Seppo told you, but her first relationship was with Seppo's son, Ensio."

Vilkas' eyes narrowed and he clenched his fist. "That's who she thought I was?" He thought as his blood started feeling like it was on fire.

Valeska's eyes widened and she took a step back. "A-anyway, daddy was just afraid. Ensio was a patient of hers. She fell in love with him and...it didn't end well. He just saw his daughter in bed with another patient and he..."

"I don't want to be like that to her. I love..." He clenched his fist hard as he could and brought it up to his chest. He looked down and took a deep breath. He felt himself calm down, even though his chest began to ache. He lowered his hand and looked back up at her. "No. I can't love her. I...shouldn't...love her, but...I do. I don't want to hurt her like that. Still, I couldn't promise that I wouldn't."

He glanced over and saw the kids running around by the town square. He looked back at her. "That's why I think I'll talk to her when she gets back, but I'll...I'll probably end up staying with Alida and Rochus until I can get a place of my own." He glanced over at the road again. He didn't see any of the children. He looked back at Valeska. He didn't feel right. "That's if I end up staying here," he finished and sighed slowly.

"I...I see," she said and began to fiddle with her fingers again. "It's not my place to say this, but..." Valeska went quiet as she appeared to struggle with her next words.

Vilkas couldn't really turn his ear toward the road, but his focus went that way. Something was eating him.

"Vilkas, you should know...Shari..."

It felt like the world slowed down. He turned toward the road as a loud crash rang out. His feet set in motion as children's screams filled the air.

“GET HELP!!!” He yelled back at Valeska. “IT’S SOCORRO!!!”

His mind went blank. He pulled off the cap and ripped off the sleeve with the sling so he could run. He heard her yell something, but the only thing clear to him was his breathing and the air blowing through his ears. It felt like his heart was pounding and his feet were falling at the same time. The blur of ruins passed by his eyes until he arrived where one of the kids were standing. The green, scaled girl held her hands up by her eyes and was crying uncontrollably.

He slid to a stop and looked inside. A human boy and a badger boy were standing on either side of Socorro trying to lift a wall that had fallen on top of him. He was still alive, but it looked like his legs were trapped.

Vilkas walked into the ruins and yelled, “Out of the way!”

The boys cried something as they stepped aside. He placed a foot on either side of Socorro and squatted down. He hooked both of his hands under the wall and put every last ounce of strength he had into lifting. His arm and leg muscles burned as he slowly lifted the wall until it was even with his waist. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth as he stepped in a bit with his left foot to lock the wall in place.

“Pull him out,” he choked out.

He pried open his eyes and looked down to see the boys pulling Socorro out. As he breathed out, the wall shifted in his hand. The top plank had snapped free from the wall. He tried to move his leg, but he felt the wall strike his knee. He felt his body fall back and he lost all of his breath as he landed on his back. He groaned and lifted his head as he opened his eyes. His lower left leg was under the wall and his right leg was off to the side with his foot trapped.

He inhaled and yelled as lava seemed to pour into his left shin. He tried to sit up but felt powerless. He lay there gasping for air. He heard another loud crack. He closed his eyes and tried to shield his face as the side wall collapsed with the remaining roof falling on his chest.

“Paska! Oletko kunnossa!?” He could hear Seppo yell. “Get more help, NOW! SOMEBODY VITUN GET SHARI!!!”

Vilkas tried to breathe. His chest wouldn't move. He tried to move anything. Nothing was moving.

"Hang in there, ystävä. Help is on the way. Someone's on the way to get Shari from Namal Lu. I pray she's on her way back."

He could feel his chest begin to burn. His head felt like it was about to explode. He tried to open his eyes. Bits of daylight shone through the loose thatching.

"Talk to me, ystävä!"

His hearing began to muffle. His vision started to become blurry. More daylight filled his vision.

"Vilkas!"

Seppo's blurry face came into view as his vision went black.

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He came to and gasped for air. The familiar feel of fluid filled his throat forcing him to cough it out. Blurry faces filled his eyes. His chest and his leg felt on fire. Shari's face came into view as clear and as beautiful as he remembered.

"Dammit! I've got to put him down!"

"Shari," he struggled to say and coughed - more fluid left his mouth.

"Shut up, meathead! Save your strength."

"I love you."

"Save it for when you..."

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"Remember..."

"Remember."

“Remember!”

“You don’t remember, do you?”

“Where am I? Why is it so dark?” I asked the voice.

“You keep forgetting, that’s why.”

“Forgetting what? What am I supposed to remember?”

A light slowly illuminated the area. It wasn’t a room. I didn’t know what or where this was.

“Us.”

Several figures seemed to fade into view as the light passed over them.

“Who are you?” I asked as I looked over the group that gathered in front of me.

“We’re you,” a wolf with wings on his back said.

He was slightly smaller than me, but it seemed we looked a lot alike. He wore strange blue trousers that were hemmed up to his knee and were held up with a black leather belt. His eyes seemed to glow a bluish hue. The color in them filled the entire eye with various shades of blue that slowly swirled.

“As are the rest of us,” a female cheetah said.

Her voice was a bit deeper than Shari’s. She was about Shari’s size and build, but muscle clearly moved under her fur as she moved. She wore a cloth wrapping that covered from her breasts down to her stomach and she wore a sort of loincloth. She was covered in scars and her eyes seemed to be a solid gold like I’ve seen in jewelry.

A human the size of the wolf stood next to him. His eyes were almost a clear blue and he wore strange red and white face paint with a multi-colored bodysuit and oversized yellow shoes. Next to the cheetah was a ferret that was about a head shorter than her with solid black eyes. He wore a tattered, hooded black robe with a rope tied around the middle. Water seemed to swirl in his palm. A female lizard stood next to the human. She was just a bit shorter than the human and wore a lovely ruby red dress that

matched her eyes. Her scales changed color to where she almost seemed invisible. A solidly built bull - about my height - stood next to the ferret wearing a suit with mirror-like glasses. A strange carrier holding a metallic object flashed inside his coat when he adjusted it around his neck.

"Maybe seven just isn't our lucky number. Suppose it never was, huh?" The ferret said as he ran a hand over his head and gave a toothy smile while chuckling.

"No kidding," the wolf said.

"I was really hoping he'd be the one," the lizard said, her voice sounded oddly cheerful.

"Just can't catch a break," the strangely dressed human said. He sounded depressed despite his colorful outfit.

The bull pulled down his glasses with a finger. His eyes looked like emeralds. "We'll have to look into this further, I guess," he said and pushed the glasses back up. His voice was very deep.

"I still don't know who you are or what's going on," I said as my eyes darted from person to person.

The wolf stepped forward and tilted his head to his left. He looked confused. "We sent you there with our memories of us and our lives. What the hell happened?"

"Even I can see that," the cheetah said as she stepped forward.

"From what I gather," the bull said as he stepped forward. "He suppressed his memories after his mother was...well..."

The human stepped forward. "I felt like I was losing my mind in my work. Maybe that's part of it too...having to work in the mine for years."

The lizard stepped forward. Her scales constantly changed color as she moved. "He looks worse than you, girl," she said and looked over at the cheetah.

"Is this going to be our last chance?" The ferret asked as he snuck into view.

It was strange. Each one of them gave off a different feeling - like an aura. The bull felt extremely intelligent and insightful. The ferret had that water that looked like a magician's trick. The cheetah held her mouth open and seemed to constantly growl as her ears moved around while she walked. If it wasn't for the dress, he wouldn't even know the lizard was there. The human had a negative feel about him. So did the wolf, but he felt stronger - almost intimidating - than the rest, yet I felt calm. It was almost like he didn't belong here, but somewhere else.

"We've all experienced our own hardships. We all strongly loved someone. Some of us had garbage upbringings and made the best of it. Others had good upbringings but garbage lives. But none of us has ever been able to have the complete package." The wolf leaned in towards me. "That was supposed to be you." He leaned back and sighed. "I can't put you at fault. I...we didn't know this would happen."

"I don't understand," I said as I felt more confused than I ever have.

"Call me the original if you want. Feels creepy, though," the wolf said. "Brr-lah," came from him as he shivered.

He took a breath and let it free from his nose. I couldn't believe what I saw when his wings and fur disappeared to reveal a human. His eyes were a normal shade of blue with a hazel burst from the pupil. He looked very...normal...plain looking.

"Look," he said and raised his right hand and turned it over. "Do you know what 'reincarnation' is?" He asked, moving his hands as he spoke.

"No."

"Well," he said and looked up and to his left. "Think of it as," he began and looked at me with squinted eyes. "Think of it as being born in a different world, or even the same world, at a different time but with the same soul. Kind of like an isekai without the truck or falling asleep and waking up to meet some goddess. We may look different, but we are the same. Does that make sense?"

"No. I don't understand any of this. What's a soul?"

The wolf...the human shrugged his shoulders as his hands went to the sides - palm up - and his eyes widened. "Beats the shit outta me." He placed his thumbs in the waist of his short trousers. "It is a thing that does or doesn't exist, depending who you ask. It's what makes us...us. Just like every person is different, every soul is different. Except ours. We share the same soul. The others didn't know that. You were supposed to, but I guess that got fucked."

"How are we the same? I still don't understand."

"Look, I don't have much time left. I can't magically put our memories back into you. You have to. Just know that you were supposed to be the final one. You were supposed to have a loving family, grow up happy, fall in love and have a family. 'Once upon a time' and 'happily ever after' and all that crap. You were supposed to be the one who was born, lived and died happy so I...so we can move on. I don't know if we can do this again." He looked painfully sad as he looked at his feet. "You don't know how lonely it gets talking to yourself for centuries."

I brought my hand up to my chest and looked at the floor. It hurt to hear that. I couldn't imagine that. If I could relate, it would have to be how empty I felt after I was taken from mother and I was forced to work in the mines.

"Is it possible," I began as I looked up at him. "Is it possible to fix this?"

"Only you can see to that, Darijus," the cheetah said and hugged me on my left side. I could feel her throat vibrate against my arm.

"Step out of the shadow," the lizard said and hugged me on the right. She felt cold.

"Never quit," the ferret said and put his arm around the lizard and gently punched my stomach. "Be a better person," the human said and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Stay smart," the bull said as he placed his hand on my other shoulder.

The human transformed back into the wolf. "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end." He laughed and said, "I totally stole that." He finished laughing and looked at me seriously, then smiled as he embraced the others. "It may

not have gone how we wanted, but there's still time to live and die happily.
Just...remember."

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Vilkas groaned as he came to. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. He opened his eyes. The ceiling was blurry, but he knew this ceiling. Many times he awoke to it. His body felt heavy. His left and right arms felt trapped. He could slightly move his right foot, but his left foot felt stiff and wouldn't move.

"I wouldn't move too much," a familiar voice said from near the door. "You're surrounded by some very tired people."

He blinked several times and his eyes cleared up. He looked over to his right. Socorro was curled up and was clutching his arm. Another cot was set up next to this one with Valeska sleeping on it. She was reaching out and holding his and one of Socorro's hands. He looked to the left. Shari was leaning over the cot with her head resting on his upper arm. She had her right arm stretched out and her fingers were laced in his. He groaned as he felt pain in his chest and his left leg.

"Are you in pain?"

Vilkas looked over to the stout Shepherd. "Yeah. What happened?"

"After you pulled up the section of wall, Socorro was pulled out and the remaining section of roof fell on top of you. Seppo and others pulled the rubble off of you. Thankfully, Shari was nearly in town. She taught Seppo how to recess...recus...get people's hearts going. He was doing that as she carried in on a feral horse by the guy they sent to get her. The rest is all foreign to me. Simply put: Shari said both of your leg bones were broken. Several of your ribs were broken and your chest bone cracked from the roof falling on you and the procedure to get your heart going again. One of your ribs stabbed through your lung." Tangi looked and sounded exhausted. He rubbed his palms over his eyes several times. "Something like that. Anyway, I'll get Nir to wake up. Shari told us all how to give you more medicine, but I don't think I can hold my hand still right now." He yawned and breathed deep. "I should warn you: The secret's out. The whole village knows who you are and what you did that night. Some are even sleeping outside

waiting for the hero to wake up. Can barely move in the dining area with how much stuff everyone brought over. Almost all work has stopped the last three days.”

“Three days?” He softly sighed as he looked back up at the ceiling. “I guess that explains why I feel hungry.”

“I might be able to give you something, but the medicine might knock you out. Your tooth should be hardened enough to chew with.”

“My tooth?” He brushed his tongue over his teeth and found his broken fang was like new. It had a slightly metallic taste to it.

“Dr. Mùli came by and made a cast, then yesterday he put it in. That’s one of the many gifts you’ve received.”

Vilkas looked over as the stout Shepherd grabbed his tunic collar.

“I still don’t like what’s going on between you and my daughter, but...you helped my grandson and nothing I do can repay that.” His voice was both serious and sad.

“So, was he injured?”

Tangi cleared his throat and lowered his hand. “Some scrapes and bruises. He was more frightened than anything. After a shower of love for his safety, he was given a very tough lecture - as were the other children.”

“That’s good,” Vilkas said and sighed as he closed his eyes. He looked over as Tangi spoke again.

“Anyway, let’s get you the medicine.”

He moved over to Nir. He was leaning back in a chair with his muzzle down to his neck. Tangi clapped his hand on Nir’s shoulder.

“Nir!”

“M-muffins!” Nir cried out.

“He’s awake. Can you give him the shot?”

Nir took several breaths. "Scared me half to death," Nir said and rubbed his eyes. He looked over the cot. He shot up and walked to the end of the bed. "I can't thank you enough for helping my son," he said, his voice beginning to waver. He held his clasped hands by his chest. "Thank you so very much for getting Soco out from the rubble and thank you so-so much for saving our town. You don't know..."

"That's enough," Tangi warned.

"Yes, please stop," Vilkas said and groaned from the pain. "I'm not a hero. I'm a ruthless killer on some sort of path to redemption. I was supposed to die that night." He gently squeezed Shari's hand. "Someone had other plans and I don't regret it."

Nir chuckled. "My sister...your daughter is like that, huh?"

"I'm very proud of her, yes," Tangi said and slapped Nir's back. "Medicine."

"R-right."

Nir quietly opened the cupboard and gently placed a container on the counter. He slowly opened a drawer and closed it. After some time, he walked over and carefully tied a cloth tightly around Vilkas' upper arm. He returned to the counter for a moment, then held up a needle and released a bit of the fluid into the air. Vilkas could feel his forearm throb with each heartbeat. Nir walked over and placed his hand on Vilkas' forearm and leaned over Shari. She softly groaned.

"Please don't wake up," Nir whispered as he held still.

Shari sighed and settled back in. Nir closed his eyes and breathed out. He opened his eyes and started feeling around Vilkas' elbow while spreading his fur. He slowly brought the needle down and pressed it into Vilkas' skin. Vilkas felt the familiar pinch, then a slightly burning sensation as Nir very slowly pressed his thumb down the plunger.

"There we go," Nir whispered as he pulled out the needle. "I hope that went okay. I've never done it before."

"I guess we'll find out if she hacks his arm off," Tangi quipped.

“Not funny,” Nir hissed.

Nir placed the needle down on the counter and carefully untied the cloth from Vilkas’ arm. Vilkas could feel the pain slowly fade away. His body began to feel light. It made him giggle.

“Best to close your eyes. Shari said it has some side effects that make you see things,” Nir said.

Vilkas giggled again and closed his eyes. “Thank you...both of you...for being here...for being my friends”

“Shove it up your ass, hero,” Tangi snapped playfully.

Vilkas chuckled, then felt himself slip away.

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