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

Chapter 21. “Golden-Hearted Wolf”

Vilkas awoke and slowly opened his heavy eyes. His body still felt light and the pain was very minimal. He could see the sun was out and the birds were cheerfully singing. The smell of food filled the air making his stomach hurt.

“Mamma, ith-ee awage yed?” Socorro asked.

“You have to be quiet, sweetie,” Valeska whispered. “He’s still sleeping. And you don’t want to wake Auntie Shari. She’s very tired.”

Vilkas glanced over at Valeska. She made eye contact with him and winked. He smiled and looked back up at the ceiling.

“I knooow,” Socorro whined, sounding dejected. “Gram-path almoth got breg-fas relly, though.”

“Shh. You have to be patient. And when he wakes up, you have to be very careful. He’s still in a bunch of pain. I’m sure he hurts all over,” she whispered.

Vilkas glanced over and slightly nodded his muzzle. She looked at him and winced, pulling her lip up and exposed some of her teeth.

“I knooow. An ith my fauld.”

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed.

He closed his eyes and gently shook his muzzle. He opened his eyes again.

“Thank you,” she mouthed to him and smiled warmly.

He smiled back. “I’m just glad you’re safe,” he whispered.

“Waaah!” Socorro shrieked, his voice cracking to a hiss.

“Socorro!” Valeska scolded him in a hushed tone.

Socorro wormed around and carefully hugged Vilkas with his arm across his upper chest and his legs pressed into his side.

“I’m nod hurding-oo am I?” Socorro asked.

“Mmmnn,” Shari moaned.

“No. You’re fine,” Vilkas whispered.

“Thang-oo for slavin me, mither, an foh slavin ev-ryone an yo my he-wo an...”

“Socorro! Quiet down,” Shari scolded the boy as she began to move. “He’s still...” Shari sat up and sleepily looked at Vilkas - her glasses were askew. “Awake.” Her eyes lit up.

“He’th awage, Aundie Shlari!”

“He’s awake, Aundie Shlari,” Valeska playfully mocked.

“I’m awake, Aundie Shlari,” Vilkas said and chuckled. “Ow,” he cried and winced as his chest stung everywhere.

“You’re awake, me,” Shari said, her grip tightening in Vilkas’ hand.

“SNERK!” Nir snorted. “Bread’s done!” Nir said loudly as he snapped awake.

“Nir, you’re so dumb,” Valeska said and laughed.

“What?” Nir said and rubbed his eyes. “He’s awake. He’s awake!” He exclaimed and stood up as he moved to the end of the cot.

“You forgot the ‘Aundie Shlari’ part,” Vilkas said and regretted another chuckle.

“What?”

Valeska, Shari and Socorro all laughed.

“What is all the,” Tangi shouted as he walked toward the room. He looked inside. “Oh. The village badass is awake, Aundie Shlari,” he dryly said.

“Shut up and finish breakfast, old man,” Valeska dryly retorted, then giggled.

“I only made enough for five. I don’t know what you’re having,” he said and walked away.

“Har-har! Nir, would you please go help that grumpy bastard?”

Nir looked at her. “Yeah, sure.” He looked back at Vilkas. “Glad you’re okay now. Is your arm okay?”

“Yeah. It’s fine. Thank you,” Vilkas replied.

“Wait...what now?” Shari asked as she looked between the two.

“During the night, I gave him a shot of the medicine. I was hoping I didn’t do anything wrong,” Nir said as he rubbed the back of his head.

“I’ll take a look at it, but I’m sure it’s fine,” Shari said, but still squinted at Vilkas’ arm.

Nir smiled. “Take care, Vilkas. And thank you once again.”

“You’re welcome again,” Vilkas said with a smile.

Nir left the room and Valeska lightly rubbed Socorro’s back. “Come on, you. That’s enough hugs for now.”

“Aww,” Socorro whined. “Okaaay.” Socorro pulled back his arm and wormed around until he was on his hands and knees. He leaned in and gently pressed his lips to Vilkas’ cheek. “Thank you, mister,” he said quietly and stared at Vilkas. His eyes sparkled and he had a large smile that looked silly with his tongue mushed out from his muzzle.

“You’re welcome, Socorro,” Vilkas said and smiled. “Go with mom and eat breakfast. Kay?”

"You comin' too?"

"If Aunt Shari allows me to." He looked over.

Shari pressed her lips together as she slowly shook her head. "Sorry, sweetie. Vilkas needs to rest."

"Can I eden here?" Socorro asked.

"Sorry, sweetie. Maybe some other time, okay?"

"Okaaay," Socorro somberly replied. He sat up on his knees and leaned in. He placed his hands on either side of Vilkas' head.

"Soco-," Valeska began.

"It's fine," Vilkas reassured.

Socorro gently pressed his head into Vilkas', then pushed back. "Ged bedder, kay?"

"I will. Thank you."

Socorro gave another mush smile and shimmied over to Valeska. She reached out and grunted as she pulled him over to her. They scooted off their cot and left the room.

Vilkas sighed and looked up at the ceiling with a slight smile. It was quiet in the room. It sounded lively in the dining area. Shari was still clutching his hand. He felt her move. She adjusted her glasses and sniffled. She wrapped her other hand around his. They felt so soft and warm.

"How do you feel?" She finally asked.

He looked over and lost his smile. Tears were streaming down from her eyes.

"I'm alive. Thanks to you...*again*. Are...*you* okay?"

"I can't keep saving you," she said, her voice cracking. Her bottom lip was quivering, but she managed to keep a fairly straight face. She sniffled and looked down

at their hands. "I'm so afraid you're going to hurt yourself one of these days and I'm not going to be able to save you."

He inhaled in his mouth to try and speak. He glanced down at their hands as the air whistled from his nose. They stayed like that for some time. He wasn't sure what to say. He finally stretched his lips and looked at her proper. "Darijus," he said quietly.

She looked up at him. "What?" She asked and sniffled.

"My name."

Her top lip wrinkled up to show a glimpse of her teeth and her eyes squinted as more tears filled, then left her eyes. She brought their hands up and pressed her forehead against the back of his hand. She quietly sobbed.

"Thank you...ssnnn...for sharing that," she said quietly. She lifted her muzzle, kissed the back of his hand, then placed her forehead back. She began rubbing her thumbs against the sides of his hand.

It hurt his heart to see her like that. But, at the moment, he had nothing to say. He couldn't promise not to get hurt again. He wasn't as good as she was at consoling. If anything, he was afraid to say something that would further upset her. All he could do in the moment was hold her hand.

"Shari," Valeska quietly said from the doorway.

Shari composed herself and looked over at her.

"Would you like me to bring you guys a plate?"

"Would you, please?"

"Coming right up, sis."

Shari wiped her eyes with her hand and pulled her hand free from his. She stood and stretched causing a ripple of cracks to come from her lower back and hips. Her elbows popped and she cracked nearly every knuckle. She sighed and grabbed Vilkas by the hand again.

“Let’s get you up so you can eat,” she said and gently pulled on his arm.

It hurt to sit up, but once he was up, the pain lessened. She moved to his side and lifted part of the bed frame up. She locked it in place and shook it a few times.

“Go ahead and lie back. Keep breathing even if it hurts,” she said as she looked sternly in his eyes.

“I can do that,” he said as he rested his back against the pillow.

“Try to breathe deep until I get back. Your lung collapsed so you need to train it to stay inflated again.”

He did as instructed as he watched her lift the foot of the other cot and move it to butt up with the counter. She used her hips to move the rest of it. She went out of the door and opened the closet door. She pulled out a wood slab and shut the door. She came into the room and set the slab on the cot. She pulled out two bipod legs and set it in front of him over his thighs. It was a small table that would allow him to eat. Valeska came into the room and placed a plate and some utensils on the counter. She came back a moment later and did the same on the small table.

“Thank you,” he said as he smiled.

“You’re welcome. Eat up. It’s getting cold,” Valeska said with her own smile before leaving the room.

“Thanks, sis,” Shari said and took the plate from the counter.

“No problem,” she called back.

Shari brought her plate over and sat back on her stool. They ate in relative silence. He felt the need to say something.

“This is really good. Your father is a great chef.”

“Yeah.”

More silence. It felt really awkward to him.

“He was telling me everything that was wrong with me. My tooth even got fixed. Regardless, I’m glad Socorro was...”

“I’m sorry. I’m not very chatty right now. I’m really hungry. Would you mind waiting until after we eat to talk?”

He could tell she wasn’t being mean about it. It didn’t stop him from feeling a bit hurt. “Yeah. I can relate.”

Shari seemed to shovel the food in her mouth. Vilkas found himself touching his repaired tooth several times with his tongue after swallowing. It felt strange for some reason. It sounded like the others were eating quietly. He could hear some voices outside.

Shari sat for a moment after clearing her plate. He still had a bit more to go.

“Would you like any more?” She asked. She seemed to be staring ahead towards his plate.

“I don’t think so. I might eat more at lunch, but right now it feels like my stomach hurts. It could be just my chest.”

“Yeah. That sounds good. I suppose you should eat light for a bit. That way your stomach doesn’t expand and restrict your lungs.” She finally looked at him. “Would you like me to explain any of that? I know Alida said she was helping you with reading. You sound more articulate anyway.”

She almost sounded disappointed. He wondered if she wanted to be the one to do that for him. “I think I understand what you mean.”

She nodded. “Okay.” She sat quietly until he finished eating and took his plate.

It looked like she still didn’t want to be disturbed. He really wished the shutter was open so he could look outside. This room wasn’t very mentally stimulating. He decided to sit quietly with his eyes closed and breathe a bit deeper than he normally did. He wasn’t sure if he needed to, but it took his mind off the pain.

It sounded like dishes were being washed and put away. They were talking amongst themselves, but he tuned them out. He was starting to feel sleepy. He caught himself nodding off a few times.

“Mamma, can I?” Socorro asked.

“It looks like he’s sleeping, sweetie. Maybe...”

He opened his eyes and looked over at them. “I’m still awake.”

Socorro smiled wide and slowly made his way over to the cot. Valeska took the tray and set it aside.

“Make it quick. He needs his rest, okay sweetie?”

Socorro climbed onto the cot and gently hugged Vilkas. He placed his hand on the boy’s back and gently squeezed.

“Thangs ‘gain, Vilgas,” Socorro whispered.

“You’re welcome, Socorro,” he whispered back.

Socorro pulled back and held his hands on Vilkas’ shoulders. He smiled very wide with his eyes closed. Vilkas couldn’t help but smile about as wide back.

“Rest up, big guy. Next time you stop in, it’s on me, okay?” Valeska said and smiled warmly.

“Yeah. I’ll take you up on that,” Vilkas replied with his own smile.

“Alright. Let’s go, sweetie.”

“Bye, Vilkas,” Socorro said as he slid from the cot.

“Bye, Socorro.”

Vilkas smiled as he lowered his head and closed his eyes. “Such good people,” he thought.

It sounded like the people were really getting worked up outside. Then it got very quiet. It sounded like someone was talking just inside the house. It got quiet again.

“Alright everyone!” Seppo announced. “Shari says we should wait a few days before seeing him, but he is awake and doing fine. So let’s show our support until we *can* see him.”

Vilkas opened his eyes and stared at the wall as cheers erupted outside. It hurt his chest. But, it was a good kind of hurt. He could feel his face scrunch up and his ear lowered to his head. Tears formed and began to fall from his eyes as he blinked.

“If I could do it all over again...I’d rather feel like this than feel angry all the time,” he said quietly.

Shari was standing in the doorway. “The path of a hero isn’t always paved with gold. Even in my line of work, it only takes one death to erase a hundred smiles.”

The cheers faded and it sounded like the crowd was dispersing.

He tried to smile as he looked over at Shari. He blinked more tears from his eyes. “Thank you so much for saving me. Because of you, I was allowed to feel this.”

Shari’s hand snatched up the bottom of her simple, white blouse from against her white trousers. She twisted it in her fists as her face twisted like she’d seen something disturbing. “You’re...you’re...” She brought her fists up to her chest. “Hah...hah,” she audibly breathed as she stared at him, clearly in distress.

“Shari!” He called out to her. He tried to move but was met with a chest full of pain.

“I’m...hah...I’m okay,” she said and swallowed hard. She breathed deep a few times. “That just...hit me hard.”

“Are you *sure* you’re okay?” He asked with concern.

“Yeah.” She breathed slowly. “That golden tongue is going to be the death of me.”

“I’m...”

“Shari,” Seppo said.

Shari looked over her shoulder. “Come in, Seppo. It’s okay.”

It sounded like something was being dragged through the house. Shari looked over at Vilkas with a wide smile. Seppo stopped and pushed something through the door. The thing he pushed in was something Vilkas had never seen before.

The front part had a metal pole with a metal handle on top. At the base of the pole, it forked and ended at a wheel. The whole thing could turn nearly all the way around. Attached above the fork was a flat metal sheet. At the back of the sheet were wheels on either side. A stanchion at the back of the plate had a curved, padded top.

“Good to see you’re well, ystävä,” he said as he walked in the room.

“Thank you, but...what is *that*?” Vilkas asked as he looked from Seppo to the contraption.

“This,” Seppo said and moved the object in his hand as he looked at it. He looked back at Vilkas and said, “Is the result of Shari, myself, and...”

Seppo stepped forward. In walked a creature that could rival Vilkas in size. The head and tail were much larger than his own. It was a lizard that most people simply called a dragon. They were very rare. People shied away from them because of the deadly poison in their saliva. That was only if you pissed them off. The real danger was in their natural strength, claws, tails and if you were bit by one.

“Ularn - our village chief and blacksmith. With your ribs, we thought it would be difficult to move around with normal crutches. So, we put our heads together and came up with this,” he said and used his hand to point at the contraption. “Put your hands here,” he said and pointed to the handle. “Put your knee in here,” he said and pointed to the padded stand. “And you can use your good foot to...sort of...scoot around.”

“I laughed at the sketch they brought me,” Ularn said. Vilkas expected an intimidating voice, but he sounded fairly normal. “But, this is genius. I’m proud of this invention.” He turned serious. “My daughter was there when you rushed in to help Socorro. And Seppo filled me in on your heroism the night those zealots attacked.” His demeanor softened. “I think I speak for everyone in Dalry when I say “Thank you”.

Thank you for your selfless exploits. From expunging those extremists, to helping tidy the aftermath, to saving little Socorro...thank you. Please accept this and the many gifts our family presented Shari and Seppo in your stead."

Vilkas lowered his ear to his head as his chest filled with pride. Tears began to fall from his eyes. He slowly shook his head as he closed his eyes and lowered his head. "I'm not a hero," he muttered.

"Sweetie...yes...you *are*," Shari stated.

"Rough around the edges, but a hero in my book," Seppo added.

"If not a hero, I'm hesitant to describe your courageous deeds otherwise," Ularn said.

Vilkas began squeezing his face as he sobbed quietly. Soft hands pressed into the back of his head as Shari embraced him. He grabbed her arm as he cried into her chest.

Shari pressed her nose against the top of his head. "This is who you are now," she said quietly. "Once you stepped foot in this village, you left your past behind. You became a kind and caring, golden-hearted man. You may not like being called a hero, but you have many people around you that love and admire you. This is what it feels like." She giggled. "You're just going to have to accept it."

He continued to weep. Images of Shari, Alida, Seppo, Socorro, Rochus and others flashed in his mind.

"We'll talk later, Shari. Please excuse us," Seppo said.

"Thank you, Seppo...Chief," she said over her shoulder and pressed her muzzle against Vilkas' head again.

She kissed the top of his head several times as she gently rubbed his back. He wasn't sure how long he cried. It felt good.

"In your heart, you are Darijus. To this village, you are Vilkas. You are no longer Viktor or whomever you once were. Remember: Everyone, no matter how bad they are, has some good in them. Just like all the goodness in you."

He moved his hand from her arm and wrapped it around her back. It hurt to squeeze her as hard as he was, but he didn't care. He wanted to cherish this moment.

"Thank you...Shari," he said meekly, then sniffled.

"You're very welcome, Darijus," she said quietly into his fur.

He breathed deeply for several moments as he calmed down. Shari pulled away from him and used the short sleeve of her blouse to wipe her eyes. She pulled the bottom of her blouse to wipe his. He looked up at her beautiful face and into her beautiful eyes.

"Aušra...was my mother's name," he said and smiled at her.

Shari's eyes widened to the size of cake plates. She wrapped her arms around his head and resumed the hug.

"Oh, sweetie!" She cried and kissed his head several times. "Thank you so much for sharing that with me." She kissed his head again. "You don't know how good it makes me feel...how honored I feel that you trust me enough to open up to me like this. It makes your pain in the ass worth saving every time you share something with me."

"Sa-wy. Uh-gan breef!"

"Oh!" She exclaimed and loosened her grip only to squeeze the side of his head against her chest.

He quietly chuckled. He listened to the sound of her heart beating as he closed his eyes. He breathed in her scent, his smile growing wider.

"I feel so lucky to have met you. Shari, I..."

He stopped himself short. He squeezed his eyes, pressed his lips together and clenched his teeth as hard as he could. He felt her grip loosen. He could hear her heart pounding in her chest. He could hear the air slowly come in and leave her chest.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Her chest trembled as she silently chuckled. “You definitely keep me on my toes and my skills sharp,” she said casually. “I already told you that as long as you are here with us, I’m here for you. Whenever you need to talk, whenever you need a shoulder to cry on, whenever you’re without direction...I’ll be there for you. My door is always open. I will always be your friend,” she tenderly said and ruffled his head fur with her muzzle.

A pain stabbed him in the chest. He opened his eyes. His body felt heavy.

“Yeah. Thank you,” he whispered as a tear left his eye. “I understand,” he thought and closed his eyes again.

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