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

All Finnish words are translated at the end

Chapter 28. “Minun Kotini On Sinun Kotisi”

Ularu looked over at Vilkas and Seppo. He looked perturbed. Vilkas glanced at Seppo. Seppo’s smile quickly faded and was replaced with his own look of concern. Ularu closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He opened his eyes and looked back at the crowd.

“Please...I implore you...do not panic.” His glance shifted from villager to villager as he continued. “Some of you have already voiced your concern over the rumors. I have failed you as a leader...as a commander...as a friend. Within the coming months, I will be stepping down as the village chief.”

Murmurs erupted amongst the crowd. Vilkas felt his jaw drop slightly as his eyes widened.

“Mitä!” Seppo uttered in shock.

The murmurs turned into a dull roar.

“You can’t *do* that, chief!” A villager cried out!

“We need you!” Another cried.

Shouts of support rang out throughout the crowd. Ularu closed his eyes and held up his hand. The noise quieted down. He slowly lowered his hand and opened his eyes to scan the crowd again.

“I failed to protect you all nearly four months ago. Lives were lost. Men. Women. Children. Fathers. Mothers. Sons and daughters. Homes and livelihoods. All lost under my watch. If it was not for our friend, Vilkas,” he said and held his hand out in front of

Vilkas, "It would have been total, complete and utter devastation." He returned his hand to his side. "Tonight, dinner will be served in the village square. All production will stop. Attendance will be required as we come together to discuss our next move. Seppo and Vilkas have already approached me with their concerns and ideals. If any of you have an idea as to how to protect our home for any future attacks, the floor will be open. All voices will be heard. Until then: Be safe, work safe, hold your heads up and we will get through this...together."

It was quiet for a moment. Everyone stared at the chief. Vilkas looked over at Seppo. Vilkas could see his lip quiver as his eyes watered. The crowd began to come alive. Vilkas looked over and watched as they all clapped and cheered for the chief and for Dalry.

Vilkas made eye contact with a smiling Alida. He smiled back with a nod. He saw Nir wringing his hands with a look of concern. Vilkas gave him a reassuring smile, though it didn't seem to have an effect on him. Vilkas followed Ularn as he began to walk away.

"Back to work, ystävät! I'll be going with the chief," Seppo said and joined them.

They made it partially down the street when Ularn spoke.

"Seppo. Vilkas. We'll be going to the other work sites to inform them of my decision. After we finish, Seppo, I'd like you to go to the vendors and tell them to close their shops a little early so that I can inform them."

"Sure thing, chief," Seppo replied.

"After we finish with the supply crews, we'll meet in the pub and begin discussions on how to proceed with preparations."

Vilkas let out a slight grunt.

"Everything alright, Vilkas?" Ularn asked.

"Yeah. Sorry. I, uh...just...haven't moved around much on the crutches," Vilkas replied.

"I see." He turned to Seppo. "In that case, go on ahead of us and inform the foresters to meet at the sawmill."

"Can do, chief," Seppo said and jogged ahead of them.

Ular turned to Vilkas. "Bear with me a little longer?"

Vilkas nodded. "No problem."

They continued down the road to the right and past Alida's house before turning to the left towards the sawmill. Seppo and the group of foresters joined them shortly after. Ular gave his speech to the same response. They turned away and began the trek to the pub. Vilkas felt his nerves falter.

"How can I face Tangi...Valeska?" He thought as he stared at the ground.

"Let us remember to keep our voices low while discussing our plans. If there is a spy within the patrons, we don't want them to discover our plans," Ular instructed

"I'll keep my eyes open. Sloppy spies have tells," Vilkas said.

"Friend, I don't know what we would do without you," Seppo said and placed his hand on Vilkas' shoulder.

Vilkas glanced over at Seppo. "Now isn't the time. Save it for the afterparty."

"Piste otettu, friend," Seppo said softly and tapped Vilkas' shoulder before removing it.

Vendors called out and Ular acknowledged them in turn. They made it to the pub entrance. Ular and Seppo went through the door first. Vilkas took a deep breath and sighed before entering. He avoided eye contact with anyone as they took a table over by the window. Vilkas knew why he was facing that direction, but it was difficult to look to the back of the pub with the nagging feeling in the shadows of his thoughts that at any moment he would be questioned about Shari.

Valeska appeared from behind the counter and stopped when she looked up. Her eyes moved from person to person sitting at the corner table. She dropped off plates of

food at a table and slowly made her way back. Vilkas flinched when he realized she was staring at him the entire time.

She circled the table and stood on Vilkas' right side.

"Chief. Pleasure to see you," she said cheerfully.

"Pleasure is mine," Ularn said back.

"Seppo. Looking good as always."

"Can't compete, unfortunately," Seppo replied.

"I'll take that as a compliment and not you flirting," she said jokingly. She seemed to glare over at Vilkas - making him cringe and glance away.

"Dammit! She knows!" He cried internally.

"What can I get you two fine gentlemen?" She asked sweetly.

"Pilsner for me," Ularn said as he placed his clasped hands on the table.

"The usual," Seppo said.

"Fruity import. Got it," she replied.

Vilkas felt his skin crawl.

"Get whatever you'd like," Ularn said. "Seppo's treat."

"Seppo's treat?" Seppo scoffed. "Is that an order...chief?" He playfully asked.

They both laughed over it. Vilkas felt something against the side of his head.

"I don't know what the shit happened this time, but I had to leave work when I heard my sister screaming. I'm tempted to leave you in a mess worse than I found her in," Valeska whispered in his ear.

"You never whisper sweet nothings in my ear," Seppo said, sounding disappointed.

Valeska pulled away from Vilkas. "I can find a nice, warm, dark place for your ears," she shot back.

Ularu erupted in laughter as Seppo scooted his chair away from her.

"All I know is you two had a fight," Valeska whispered again. "She's all tore up about whatever was said, but I didn't get the sense she's still mad at you and I see how you're acting around me. Give it a couple of days for her to sort out her thoughts and go talk to her." She pulled away from his ear, then came back. "I don't suggest you speak with daddy anytime soon." She pulled away again. "And if you don't, I'll shove your head up his ass," she announced as she pointed at Seppo.

Vilkas could hear Tangi's cloth squeak around the inside of a mug with how quiet the pub was.

"Tuomita, friend," Seppo said softly with concern. "Whatever you did, keep my tail hole out of it."

Valeska began moving around the table. "I was just telling him he should buy me flowers again." She placed her hand on Seppo's back and rubbed it as she looked down on him. "Specially with all the times I have to check on her to make sure she's eating and sleeping while that fool's laid out on her table." She leaned in and whispered to Seppo, "Or would you like to be next?"

Seppo's eyes went wide. "Flowers. Can do," he said nervously.

Valeska leaned away and patted his back before moving away from the table. Ularu snorted, then laughed.

"Never a dull moment with you, is there?" Ularu asked as he wiped an eye while looking at Seppo.

"I didn't even do anything," Seppo whined, causing Ularu to laugh again.

They began their talk by deciding what should be served for the banquet that night. Valeska brought over the drinks on a tray. She set down a small glass of liquor in front of each of them with their drink. They clanged their glasses and downed the spirits. Vilkas was given a fruity ale that tasted a lot like the berry juice he'd had before.

They spent the next several hours talking about how they were going to get the villagers selected and trained for combat under Vilkas' tutelage. Lunch was served and they continued their discussion afterward. A common defense of a wall-like structure was shut down with how they wanted the town aesthetic to stay. However, a barricade using the charred structural beams was approved along the Northern front. A warning system including a large bell was approved as was a spotter posted at all times. Vilkas went into detail on how he was going to train the people. He never did spot anyone suspicious.

Dinnertime was coming soon. They were winding down the talks when Ularn left to speak with Tangi and Seppo turned towards Vilkas.

"You need a place to stay, don't you?" Seppo asked quietly.

Vilkas went wide-eyed as he looked over at him. He looked down at the table. "Yeah. We...had a...disagreement."

"I see." Seppo placed his hands together and rest his short muzzle against them. "I can't tell you what I know, but I think she's just trying to figure herself out more than just you." He looked over his fingers, then back at Vilkas. "Might I ask your feelings towards her?"

Vilkas cringed and glanced away towards the door. He drew in a breath and readied his reply. He looked at Seppo and said, "I love her. I told her and she started insulting me and..." He looked down at the table again.

"I had a suspicion. Firsthand, I know why she's guarding herself. While I can't say I know you well, I feel like you're not a bad guy." He sighed. "I raised my son to be a good person and look how that turned out. I guess I'm not always right with my character judgments."

"If we were right about everything, there'd be nothing left to learn."

Seppo lowered his hands. "Paska, friend. Mind if I use that quote someday?"

Vilkas smiled and looked over at him. "It'll cost you a few nights at your place. Unless you want me to stay with Alida again. I don't want to trouble you."

“Not at all. We can talk a bit more specifically about your training. And...I can go by Shari’s and pick up some clothes for you. I can check on her for you, too.”

“I’d appreciate that...friend,” Vilkas said and smiled.

Ulnar held a small meeting with the vendors as the tables were being set up for the banquet. Amy chose to spend the time stealing glances at Vilkas. He wasn’t sure if he felt uncomfortable or flattered.

The food was brought out and people were beginning to take their seats. Ulnar was situated between Vilkas and Seppo. Vilkas looked for Shari. She was sitting with Socorro, Valeska, Nir and Tangi at the end of the row. She didn’t appear to be upset. It was a little hard to tell without being too conspicuous.

As the meal was coming to a close, Ulnar raised his mug and tapped his spoon against it. The idle chatter came to a halt. He placed his spoon down and raised his mug back up.

“Before I begin, I’d like to propose a toast.” Everyone raised their mugs with him. “To the health, safety, and continued success of Dalry.”

Cheers rang out and the people took a drink. He placed down his mug and looked across the faces of everyone present.

“As you all know, I will be stepping down as chief of Dalry. I’m fully prepared to back whomever steps forward and takes my place. While I’m joining those that would back Seppo. If Vilkas wants to lead everyone here, then I’m one hundred percent behind that as well.”

The people began to mutter and murmur amongst themselves. Vilkas stared at Ulnar as if he’d lost his mind. He glanced over at Seppo who was grinning and pointing at him.

“On to more important news,” Ulnar raised his voice to say. The crowd quieted. “Rumors have floated around about another attack on our town to take away the trade route from the capital and the three largest cities in the country. Vilkas has suggested volunteer positions for training in combat. Any persons willing to take up arms and defend Dalry are to meet tomorrow morning after breakfast near the sawmill.”

“Hell yeah!” Someone shouted, causing an eruption of cheers.

Tables were being pounded. Whistles and random shouting filled the air. People were standing and clapping. Ulnar tried to calm the crowd down. He went on after it was quiet again.

“The training will conclude before dinner is served. Those merchants who wish to participate will get assistance in covering your business. Forestry and the majority of the sawmill will be shut down to begin tearing down the remaining houses to clear lines of sight. The sawmill will be used to create targets and training dummies. A small team will be dispatched to erect a barrier using the ruined supports we’ve collected. A few people who wish to volunteer as a scout to be stationed to the North will serve as our warning system and a warning bell will be placed nearby.” Ulnar looked over the crowd. “The floor is open for any further suggestions.”

The crowd began to talk amongst themselves.

“We don’t know anything about that kind of stuff. I put my faith behind our hero to help ensure our safety. If he’s already talked to you about it and this is what you’ve come up with, then I think that’s enough,” someone said.

Vilkas couldn’t see who was talking, but it sounded like one of the voices he recalled from the cleanup crew.

“If that’s the consensus, then so it shall be. Come to myself, Vilkas or Seppo if you come up with something,” Ulnar said and looked across the crowd. “Everyone, thank you for your time and enjoy the rest of the evening.”

The people began to talk and move about. Some started helping with the cleanup and others left. Ulnar sat and placed his elbows on the table, then clasped his hands in front of him. He wore a look of concern.

“Daddy! We’re going to be okay, right?” Ulnar’s daughter asked from across the table.

“Yes, honey. We’ll be fine,” Ulnar said reassuringly, his expression softening.

“That’s ‘cause we have him, right?” She asked and pointed at Vilkas.

Vilkas did his best to smile at her with confidence.

“He’s going to do everything he can to make sure of it.”

“Everything will be oookay,” she said brightly and smiled just as bright.

“I hope so,” Ularn whispered.

The crowd left and the cleanup was finished. The tables were being moved away. Ularn excused himself with his family. Seppo said that he was going to stop by Shari’s. Vilkas was nearing Seppo’s shop and ready to relax from all the attention.

“U-um...Vilkas?”

The familiar voice made him slightly wince. He stopped and turned to look over at the squirrel.

“I-I’m going to help...tomorrow. I want to fight too.” She looked at him with confidence, but she was fidgeting with her fingers by her stomach. “I don’t know i-if I’ll be any good, but I want to try.”

It was quiet for a moment. He could tell she was nervous.

“Well, I’m sure we can find something you can swing or shoot if you are willing to learn,” he said while internally failing to find anything she would be good at with such a frail body. “As long as you’re prepared and comfortable with the possibility of losing your life, then I’ll see you in the morning.”

He placed his crutch to the side to leave.

“I’ll do my best,” she said and uncomfortably smiled. She looked down at the ground.

“Goodn-...”

“Have dinner with me,” she blurted as she looked up at him.

He stopped mid-turn and looked back at her. She looked away, then back at him.

“Please, um...” She looked down again as she swung her arms behind her back. She glanced up then back down at the ground before looking at him. “I’d I-like to have d-dinner with you...tomorrow.”

He turned back to face her. “I’m sure we’ll all be having din-...”

“At my place then,” she blurted, then looked away. She glanced at him. “To, um...” She glanced away, then looked at him. “T-to talk about m-my progress a-and what I can do better.”

He looked away for a moment. “This a good idea?” He thought. “I feel like there’s more to this.”

He looked back at her. She looked away, then back at him. He sighed quietly and gave a slight smile.

“Okay,” he finally said.

Her tail shot straight up behind her back. She stared at him with her mouth open as her tail fluttered a few times. She huffed out her breath and swallowed.

“Um...okay. Great. Um,” she said and squirmed in place as she glanced away. She glanced back at him. “I-I’ll s-s-s-see y-y-y...” She closed her eyes and sighed. She opened her eyes and appeared more confident. “I’ll s-see you t-tomorrow,” she said and let her breath out.

“Yeah. See you tomorrow. Good night, Amy.”

“Good night,” she whimpered and dashed away.

He watched her run past Ular’s shop, fumbled with the door on the house just past it and disappeared. He shook his head as he heard her squeal. He smiled as he turned to go to Seppo’s house.

He waited outside of Seppo’s house, not wanting to be rude and walk in without him. A few more squeals came from the right as he leaned against the outer wall.

“I may have made a huge mistake,” he thought as she shifted on the crutches.

His arms were really sore. A bath sounded incredible right about now. It took Seppo some time before he appeared from around the corner.

“Why didn’t you go in and make yourself at home?” Seppo asked as he walked towards Vilkas.

“I just thought it wouldn’t be right to be in your home without you. Especially the first time.”

“Minun kotini on sinun kotisi. My home is your home, friend. Let’s get inside and wash up.”

Seppo opened the door and stepped through. Vilkas followed him and was welcomed with a rancid smell. He had to breathe through his mouth. Seppo moved through a mess of stuff and lit a lantern.

It was set up like Shari’s house. To the right were several barrels of different metals. Small wooden boxes lined the wall to the right over to the stove. The stovetop and both counters had used cooking trays, pots and pans. The sink was full of dishes. The drying rack had a single plate, fork and a mug in it. The table was covered with sheets of leather and coils of thin ropes made of different materials. Against the wall in front of the door was a sloppy stack of wood.

“You have a look like you’re holding a lemon in your mouth,” Seppo said, sounding ashamed.

Vilkas looked over at him and said, “Sorry. I have a sensitive nose.”

“Shari mentioned you have a lot of feral traits,” Seppo muttered as he leaned against the counter with his right hand propped up on it. “I’m sorry, friend. I haven’t had anyone over in years. I use it as storage, as you can clearly tell,” he said, waving his left hand in front of him. “These days, I eat and drink over at the pub. I come home and head straight to bed.” He sighed and ran his hand down his face. “I’m not the “Ideal Candidate”,” he said, holding up the first two fingers on each hand and dropping them when saying it, “That everyone thinks I am.”

He dropped his hands, slapping them against the counter, and walked over to the table. He moved some things around and sat at the table.

"I'm work-obsessed. I don't take care of myself, let alone my home. I take medication to treat depression." He reached over and held up a small jar that was on top of Vilkas' clothes. He set the jar down upon the table on a bare spot. "My wife left me when my son was young. My son messed up my life even more when the whole thing with Shari went down." Vilkas could see tears forming in his eyes. "Then I wrap myself up with work, drink myself to sleep and the town gets attacked." Tears began to fall from his eyes. "You know, I was passed out *drunk* during the attack?" He slowly shook his head. "And people want me to be their leader," he said quietly.

Vilkas looked down at the floor. His shoulders were like gelatin and his armpits felt raw. He looked back up at Seppo.

"I don't know what any of that's like. I wish I could sympathize your feelings and empathize your situation. The only thing I *can* do is help a friend."

Vilkas moved over and reached through two barrels and pushed open the window. He moved to the sink and pushed open that window. He placed his crutches against the counter and began stacking plates and bowls.

"What are you doing?" Seppo wept.

"Dishes."

"But...you..."

Vilkas turned his upper body with a plate in his hand. "Say it and you wear it," he warned and turned back to the mess.

Seppo sniffled and groaned. He began to chuckle. "Uskomaton." He laughed. "You are a strange one. Killer, village savior and dishwasher."

Seppo stood from the table and began to stack the dishes up with Vilkas. Seppo brought a clean washcloth from the other room and handed it to Vilkas. Vilkas used it to wipe out the sink. He reached in and unclogged the drain grating. Seppo took the plate he placed the mess on and dumped it into the trash. Vilkas stopped the drain and began to pour the water. Bits of algae came out in chunks. Vilkas looked over at Seppo with a stone face.

Seppo chuckled. "Guess I haven't used it in a while."

"A *while*?" Vilkas asked, barely containing his laughter. He scooped out the chunks with his hand as he chuckled to himself.

Seppo laughed. "Washroom water is still good."

"That's good. At least this washing liquid stuff is still good," he said as he poured some of the oddly pleasant - in this situation - liquid from the jar. "All that walking, if you want to call it that, destroyed my shoulders."

"You shouldn't even be standing, from what I know."

"I shouldn't have done a lot of things," Vilkas muttered as he began scrubbing the dishes.

Seppo stopped moving dishes around and looked over at Vilkas. "You are a thousand times different from when I first met you. You speak more. You speak well. And you speak smart. Maybe you *should* be the next chief."

"If I live long enough to sleep in my own house, I'll think about it."

"Please don't talk like that," Seppo pleaded. "I've lost enough people already. I don't want to lose anymore."

"The only thing certain in life is that nothing is certain."

"You sure you were born in this world?"

Vilkas dropped the plate he was washing. "Hand slipped," he murmured.

They continued to talk as Vilkas washed the dishes. It took a long time, but they found plenty to talk about.

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

*Mitä: What

*Ystävät: Friends

*Piste Otettu: Point taken (aka Touché, but it doesn't translate verbatim in Finnish)

*Minun kotini on sinun kotisi: My home is your home

*Uskomaton: Unbelievable