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WARNING: May contain coarse language, violence, gore, sexual content or poor interpretations of stuttering and/or women. Reader discretion is advised.

As before: Seppo's Finnish words are translated at the end

Chapter 29. "Date"

Seppo placed the last dry dish in the cupboard and let out a tired groan.

"I still can't believe you would walk into my house and start cleaning. I'm thankful, though I feel I should be embarrassed. The hero of Dalry did my dishes after all."

"The smell would have kept me up." Vilkas looked around the cluttered dining area. "It has a different feel to it. I can't really explain why, but Aldia's house feels warm and inviting. Shari's house feels...meh. This place made me feel like running away."

"That's cold," Seppo said as he leaned against the counter. He looked down at the floor. "But, I get what you're saying." He looked over at Vilkas. "I'll make you a promise. When the village gets repaired, I'll clean this place out."

"I'll help," Vilkas said and smiled.

Seppo smiled back. "Thank you, friend." He reached up and tilted his head to crack his neck. "Ugh," he sighed. "I better get the bath ready. I should change the bedding in the spare room, too."

"I'm going to sit for a minute. My leg is screaming."

Seppo looked over at him. "You don't have to be tough all the time. If you were in that much pain, I would've taken over."

"I honestly don't know anything other than all in. I've never relied on others for help."

"Well, friend," Seppo said and placed his hand on Vilkas' shoulder. "You've got about fifty friends that are more than willing to help. The hardest part is asking. Believe me, I know."

“Thank you...friend.” Vilkas gave a tired smile.

Seppo looked disturbed. “I don’t have to wash you, do I?”

Vilkas cringed. “No.”

Seppo breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s good.” He took his hand off of Vilkas’ shoulder. “I had to have a few drinks after those times. I didn’t want something to awaken inside me.”

“Trust me. It was a lot more uncomfortable with Nir.” Vilkas shivered at the memory of the first time.

“I won’t ask,” Seppo said and left the room.

Vilkas hopped over and sat at the table. He stretched out his right leg. He groaned as his stomach tightened. His face contorted with the pain as he leaned forward, holding his arm against his stomach.

“It’s getting worse,” he thought. He closed his eyes. “It wasn’t bad at first. I should have told Shari about it.”

Seppo moved to the spare room as water filled the washtub. A dull ache filled Vilkas’ head. He breathed deep and slowly. The pain in his stomach started to subside.

“Bath should be warm in a few minutes,” Seppo said as he walked in the dining room. He leaned in and looked closely at Vilkas. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’m just tired, I think. I haven’t moved around a lot in the last few months. I think it just sank in is all.”

“If you’re still in pain tomorrow, I can get something from Shari,” Seppo said with concern.

“Yeah,” Vilkas said with a nod. “I’ll hop in the bath first if you don’t mind. I think the cold water will help.”

“Knock yourself out,” Seppo said and sat at the table.

Vilkas stood and grabbed the nightwear from the stack of clothing. He hopped over and grabbed a crutch, Then moved into the washroom. He winced as he sank into

the water, but sighed contentedly as the cool water soothed his aching body. After bathing and drying off, he excused himself to the bedroom.

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In the morning, Vilkas changed and moved into the dining room. Seppo had cleared off part of the table and had a plate of food waiting. He brought it over from the pub which explained why the stovetop was clean.

After breakfast, they moved over by the sawmill. Ularn greeted them with the carts from the cleanup full of weapons, armor and shields. The sawmill was busy. Some of the workers assisting them were already assembling a couple archery targets.

About half of the village showed up. Men and women of all sizes and breeds were present. He looked over the crowd that huddled close to him. He looked at Ularn and Seppo. They seemed to be passive. He sighed and mustered up his thoughts.

“Today we’ll be focusing on every person’s strengths. Ularn has prioritized your safety. As soon as the targets are finished, we will focus on long-distance. Anyone that hits the target will remain with the bow and improve their technique, accuracy and speed. Those that are close will get my assistance in improving those areas. All others will remain working with melee weapons.”

He could sense a lot of the people present were nervous. “Until then, move to the cart and choose a weapon. Spread out and swing the weapon, stab with it, pretend to block with it, drop it and pick it up. If it doesn’t feel comfortable, choose another and repeat. Today’s primary concern is just getting everyone comfortable with a weapon. I will go around and help with proper technique so that you don’t hurt yourself or each other.”

He became serious and showed it with his expression and his voice. “I don’t think I have to tell you that we are not out here to play around. If you’re here to fuck around, you can fuck off.” He scanned the crowd. It felt he got his point across. “Tomorrow, we’ll focus on advanced techniques, footwork and mock battles. Find a weapon, find a space and get to work. Don’t go all out on the first day. That’s a real good way to get hurt. Swing slow. Stab slow. Be safe.”

The villagers began picking up weapons and swinging them around a few times. He moved around the clumsy group and gave each person basic points to focus on. If they were struggling too much, he had them choose a different weapon. He was

struggling to keep focused with the honey and chocolate eyes watching them from a distance.

After lunch was served, the archery targets were completed. He had them line up across from one of the targets. They stood about thirty yards from the target.

"I'll briefly go over shooting a bow. Each person will get five shots. Those that hit the target will spend the remaining hours shooting and improving your accuracy. Those that come close will get some more time and I'll help improve your shot. Take your time. There is no rush." He felt the need to get serious again. "Don't be a tough guy and purposely fumble with the bow or shoot away from the target. I'm not the best with a bow, but I know what I'm looking for."

He stepped in front of the crowd and had the person in line hold his crutches. He balanced on one foot and nocked an arrow. He took a breath and drew the string back. He loosed the arrow and it struck the target near the edge. He passed off the bow and took back the crutches.

"If I can do that on one foot, you can do it on two. Step forward and I'll walk everyone through the process."

Vilkas helped each person with the proper hand placement, drawback, and aiming. The people struggled. Several shot close to the target. Those people were asked to stay for the rest of the day and improve their accuracy. Vilkas worked with several others to work on their technique.

The remaining people were spread out and worked more on getting comfortable with their weapons. When he felt the archers were improving, he moved back around and helped the others with their weapons.

Half of the dummies were finished. He had those that seemed comfortable take some practice swings against the dummies to get used to the feel of the strike and the recoil it may cause if not struck properly.

When the time was coming, they returned the weapons and they were locked inside of the workshop next to the sawmill. Ularn and Seppo left early to work on the warning bell and to check the progress of the barricade and the scout post.

Amy stopped Vilkas to say she was going to get ready for their date. Even though she tried to correct herself and say "dinner", the damage had been done. He smiled and told her he'd be there after bathing. It wasn't a particularly warm day, but he

did end up working up a sweat. And his arms hurt. He wasn't sure what to think of the dark chocolate and caramel fur that walked away as Amy dashed off. It made him feel awkward.

After the bath, he couldn't help but have his eye caught by the yellow shirt and white pants. He wasn't entirely sure how to wear these. He pulled on the shirt and buttoned it. He pulled up the pants and tucked in the shirt, then hooked the two buttons on the pants - one near the crotch and the other on the waistband. He shifted the thin, brown leather belt through the waist loops and fastened the buckle.

He looked over himself. For some reason, he was getting nervous. He made his way out to the dining area and out the front door.

"You look fancy," Seppo said as he walked close. "Wondered why you didn't stay for dinner. You, uh, going on a date?" Seppo glanced up and down at him.

"Dinner. I was invited. I guess I don't know how to say, "No"."

"I guess that explained the black blur that passed by the shop. I heard gossip of a certain lady that was interested in a certain man. I guess that was more than a rumor."

"Yeah. I guess so. I'm not sure what I'm going to do or say. I've never done this before."

"Just be yourself. I'm not the best at giving advice on the matter, but I do know that." Seppo stepped close and placed his hand on Vilkas' shoulder. He looked him in the eyes. "I know you have feelings for Shari. I know that you're not used to all this civilized living and you're unsure of a lot of things. I know there are more single women in this village that were interested in spending time with you. This girl found the courage to approach you. Treat her kindly. If you don't feel any connection with her after a while, don't be afraid to let her know. If you do, don't be afraid to see each other again. Your first love isn't always your last. Give her a chance, I think, is all I'm trying to say."

"I think that made me even more nervous," Vilkas said with an uneasy chuckle.

"You'll be fine." Seppo slapped his shoulder and glanced away. "I would say, "Break a leg," but that isn't appropriate about now." He looked back in his eyes. "Onnea sinulle, then." Seppo smiled and went into the house.

Vilkas sighed. "Yeah. Break a leg," he muttered as he looked at the ground ahead of him.

He moved through the short alley and turned in front of Ularn's shop. He stopped in front of the empty flower stall and took a deep breath. He glanced to the right.

"I saw you," he thought as he narrowed his eyes at the far corner of Seppo's shop. "But, now what?" He thought as he stared in that direction.

He took a deep breath to calm himself. He lowered his muzzle in front of him and closed his eyes. He reached out and tapped on the door with his knuckle.

"BAH!" Amy shrieked. "C-c-coming!"

He heard soft footsteps beyond the door stop on the other side. He could hear her take a deep breath and let it out. The door slowly opened. A wave of floral scents and tomato sauce passed by his nose.

Amy took her hand off the door handle and held the first two fingers of her left hand in her right by her waist. She was wearing a light purple dress that reminded him of the flowers his mother loved so much. It didn't have sleeves and exposed her shoulders, but smoothly covered her chest and wrapped around her neck like a collar. It was cinched at the waist with a white cloth sash. The bottom was wavy and flowing down to where her white feet peeked out underneath. A dark purple flower was clipped to her hair on the right side to hold it away from her face. Her tail was up and arched over behind her shoulders.

"Beautiful," he said faintly.

She squeaked - her tail standing straight up behind her - and brought her hands up to cover her face. "Th-th-th-thank you," she stammered quietly through her hands. "Mmm," she groaned in a high pitch. She spread her middle and ring fingers on her left hand. "Com-muh-muh-min," she stuttered and stepped to the side.

He moved his crutches across the threshold and looked around. This was also set up like Seppo's and Shari's houses. Kitchen in front with a dining table. Hallway to the left. He was starting to notice a pattern. Her dining table was small and round with a stanchion in the middle that ended in four long feet. Two high-back chairs were on either side of the table with small, pillowed cushions on the seat. He could pick out the citrus cleaning solution out of the smell.

"She put a lot of time into this, I think," he thought as he moved over by the table.

She stood by the door - still covering her face - and closed it when he moved past her. The table had the dinnerware set out with a thin vase of flowers in the middle. Two long, thin, lit candles in holders were on either side of the table. He looked over and saw a deep sheet pan of something on a cooling rack next to the stove.

"C-c-can I take your cr-cr-cr-utches?" She asked from his left, making him jump a little.

"Thank you," he said and passed them over.

She placed them against the wall. He saw the collar had a hook clasp behind the neck and her entire back was exposed - if her tail wasn't in the way - to the white sash. She had her hair collected in the back with a long clip that had small white flowers surrounding three more of the dark purple flowers.

She moved over and pulled out a chair from the table. "P-p-p-lease sit."

"Thank you again," he said with a slight smile and hopped over to the chair.

He sat and watched her move over, pull out her chair and sit. She had a wide smile and her chest seemed to heave as she breathed. Her tail would flutter and her nose would twitch every so often. He felt awkward at the silence. He glanced away a few times trying to come up with something to say.

"Ah...thank you for having me," he said, nervously. "I've...it's my first time being at someone's house without it being a necessity." He kicked himself on the inside.

She nervously laughed. "Food," she suddenly blurted, her eyes flying open, and stood.

She moved over to the counter and grabbed a knife. She began to cut into the baking dish.

"I made a split lasagna. I wasn't sure what you liked. Half has shredded chicken and the other half is vega-darian...vega...vege-*tarian*." She walked to the table. She reached for his plate and looked away. She glanced at him, then away. "W-w-w-hich wo-," she stammered, closed her eyes, pressed her lips together and took a breath. "Would you like?"

"I hope I'm not being rude, but...are you okay?" He asked out of concern.

“Hah-rrr,” she seemed to squeal or growl as she stepped away from the table and covered her face again.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…”

“N-n-n-n-n-no!” She stuttered through her hands. She stood away from the table, hands over her face and breathed heavily. She lowered her head and took a few deep breaths. “I’m n-n-n-ervous. An-an-and I stutter more wh-wh-when I’m n-n-ervous.”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous,” he said and looked at the flowers in front of him. “If you knew what I came from into where I am now, you’d understand. I don’t know what to say or how to act in front of others. It’s terrifying. More so than someone charging at me with a sword. But, I guess that could be just me.”

He could see her hands lower from her face. “Really?” She asked as she raised her head. “I was scared of you when you came by the stand the first time. You were scary looking, but you were really nice and sweet.”

He looked over at her. She cringed a little and her tail shot up again.

“B-b-b-but n-n-ow I,” she said and covered her face again, then breathed out - her tail arching over again.

“Does it help if I don’t look at you? I’m not sure how to help you feel at ease.”

She took a few deep breaths. “I’m sorry. I feel embarrassed. I tried so hard n-n-ot to stutter. I spent all day looking at you and p-p-p-pretended to talk to you to w-w-w-hurk up the c-c-courage to n-n-ot be n-nervous.”

He looked at the flowers again as he held up his hand by his face. He split his middle fingers and looked through them at her. “Is this better?”

Her fingers split and she laughed nervously. “No. You look silly.”

He moved his hand and looked over at her with a smile. “You’re silly. I’m not as scary as I used to be. Just breathe. Speak slow if you have to. You don’t need to feel nervous around me. Just pretend I’m a customer again. You don’t have trouble speaking to *them*, do you?”

Her eye moved around between her fingers, then looked at him. “No. I g-g-guess not.”

Her fingers gradually curled over as she slowly lowered her hands. She held her hands in loose fists by her chest. She took a deep breath, let it out, then took a smaller breath.

"I was born with a stutter. I worked with Shari and another doctor to work on it, but I still stutter when I'm nervous," she said quietly and looked over at the table. "Sorry."

"What for?" He asked, confused. Her eyes moved towards him. "I wasn't born like this, but I had my arm practically taken from me. I learned to live...mostly without it. I don't mean to compare a peach and a banana, but I think you're doing a great job of speaking."

She smiled nervously. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," he said and smiled back. He held out his plate. "I'll have what you're having."

"Right. Food," she said and grabbed his plate. She turned to the counter and grabbed a metal spatula. "I mostly eat vega-vega," she stammered and sighed. "I still struggle with some words. Soft 'gee' is fine, but hard 'gee' for some reason..." She scooped a slice of the food onto his plate. "It's like tripping on your tongue. Otherwise, the words gu-gu...*just* don't come out."

She turned and placed the plate in front of him.

"That must be very frustrating."

"It can be."

"I was born right-handed. I guess I was lucky to relearn everything while I was still young. I don't remember that frustration, but I have encountered many frustrating things since I came here. I just do my best to work through them."

"I'm not very smart. So on top of being teased for stuttering, I was teased for being dumb. I was okay at math and I've always loved flowers. I have a strong nose so I like things that smell nice. Seppo helped me out by having me sell his gu...jew-elry and stuff."

Vilkas reached over and held out her plate for her.

She laughed nervously and took the plate. "I get distracted easily and talk a lot sometimes."

She moved over and slid a slice of the food onto her plate.

"I have a strong nose, too. Since I've come here, I sometimes find myself distracted or talk too much as well."

"Really? That's so weird."

"Is it weird?" He genuinely asked.

"No. I mean...like...how we have that in common."

"Oh. I see what you mean now."

She walked over and sat at the table. She looked over at him and smiled with a nervous laugh. "Eat up. I hope it's good." She grabbed her fork and cut off a bite.

He was starting to miss not doing the speech like how Alida did. He looked at the plate instead as he grabbed his fork.

It was a layered noodle dish. It had a white filling with various vegetables. He could tell there was rice, mushrooms and tomatoes in it. The rest was a bit foreign to him. Three vegetables looked similar. A harder yellow, green or purple skin with a whitish, mushy center. There were dark green leafy bits, bumpy white clumps, white strings like cheese and topped with a white cheese and bits that looked like seasoning.

He cut off a bite and put it in his mouth. He found the flat noodles chewy and normal. The white filling was creamy and cheesy. The vegetables didn't seem to have much of a strong flavor, but the skins were a bit tough. He could definitely taste the tomato. It was all very mild.

"I have a strong tongue so I hope it's not bland," she said while holding a bite on her fork.

"No. It's good. I have a strong tongue, too. My ears are sensitive as well. Shari says I'm half feral." He startled a bit when she dropped her fork.

"Get out!" She exclaimed, her tail standing up and her hand covering her mouth. "I always thought I was weird. Can you move your tail more than others?"

"Yeah," he said and moved his tail a bit for some reason.

"I didn't tell Shari because I thought it was normal." She glanced down at the table. "She did tell me that I have a normal va-dina even though it's shallow."

He lowered his fork and tilted his head while looking at her in disbelief. She covered her face and squealed while stamping her feet.

"Too much information, I think," he told her.

"I just want to die," she wheezed.

"If it helps, I can tell you about mine."

"No! Please don't!"

"Maybe we should just eat?"

She nodded - hands and all.

He continued to eat. She finally lowered her hands a few moments later and continued eating. She didn't look at him for the rest of the first plate. She got up and served herself another slice. She walked over and grabbed his plate.

"I'll try some of the chicken side," he said, then looked at her and smiled.

She gave him an uneasy smile with a nod. She returned and set down his plate. This was just as good. The chicken was seasoned just right.

"I didn't say this before, but this is delicious," he said as he cut off another bite.

"Thank you," she nervously said.

He was struggling with the silence. He was so used to Shari talking and him responding. He looked around for something to strike up a conversation about. He felt the flowers might be a good topic.

"So...where do you get the flowers from?"

She swallowed and looked over at him. "Some come from the farmers bringing them from around the fields. Some I buy from other cities. But, most are grown in a greenhouse on the other side of town. I worked for the former owner until recently when they gave it to me. They retired, but still help take care of them."

"Is it difficult to take care of them?"

She shook her head. "No. Not really. Some take more water. Some take more fertilizer. Some need a bit more shade. Otherwise you plant seeds or they grow back and you watch over them."

"I'll have to go and look at it sometime."

She looked down at her plate. "I c-c-an sh-sh-sh-show you some-muh-muh-time." She glanced up at him with a cringed expression.

"I'd like that."

He could feel his stomach tighten and his head began to hurt more than usual. He did his best not to let her see his pain for the rest of the meal.

"Did you, maybe, want more," she asked, her small muzzle pointed at her plate with her eyes looking at him.

"No. Thank you. Again, that was really good."

She glanced back at her plate. "I'm full, too. I'll get the dishes."

Amy stood and collected the plates. She placed them in the wash basin and stood by it for a moment with her hands by her waist.

"I didn't get us drinks. Would you like tea, juice, water or something?" She asked quietly.

"I'm growing fond of tea. I'd like that, please."

"Sure, um...hot or cold?"

"I've only had it hot. So...I guess either is fine."

She reached under the counter for a cover and placed the pan in the cooler. She pulled the kettle from another cupboard and put some water in it. She placed it on the stove. She turned around - looking like she wanted to say something - and looked away. She stayed like that for a short while.

“So, um, what do you do?” She looked over at him. “Like...for work and stuff.”

He looked over at the flowers. “I...you could say I don’t. I was a mercenary for so long that I’m only good at that. I haven’t thought much about what to do now. With the training I’m doing and the village cleanup, I put those thoughts aside.” He shrugged. “Lately it seems my job is ‘Shari’s patient’. I’m still learning new things. I don’t have any other skills or hobbies.”

“So...did...you...kill people?” She tentatively asked.

He looked down at the table, then nodded. “Yeah.” It was quiet for a moment. “A lot.” He looked over at her. “That’s all I knew for most of my life. After coming here and learning what normal living is like, I find myself feeling not very proud of it.” He looked down at the table. “Sorry. I don’t like talking too much about my past. I don’t remember a lot of it. Like it didn’t happen.” He shook his head. “More like I didn’t care. The better part of my life was before my mother died and after I met Shari.”

She placed a mug down in front of him and sat at the table.

“You talk a lot about Sh-Sh-Shari.”

He swallowed. “Yeah. I guess so.”

He picked up the mug and took a long drink before setting it down. He didn’t even taste it. He felt bad about it. He took a smaller drink and recognized it as the green tea he’d had before with a lighter touch of sweetness as if less honey was put in.

“D-d-d-d-do you l-l-l-like her?”

He glanced over his mug at her. She held her mug in both trembling hands. Her short muzzle was pointing at her mug and her eyes moved from it to him several times.

He put his mug down and swallowed hard. He stared at his mug. “I’m not sure how this works,” he muttered as his eyes darted across the table. “But...I’m in love with Shari...but I don’t want to hurt you because I know you like me,” he said quietly.

He looked over when he heard her snifle. She was looking at him with a pained expression and tears streaming from her eyes. Her hands were squeezing the mug tightly.

“Amy?”

“I kn-n-n-n-ew it an-an-an-an-an’ wh-wh-wh-went an-an-an-an-an-an’ m-m-m-m-may d-d-d-d-d-inner l-l-l-l-like a id-d-d-d-yet. I’m-m-m-m s-s-s-o s-s-s-s-stupid.”

Her jaw quivered with her open mouth and twisted lips. Her face turned down further and her vision looked blurred from her watery eyes.

He felt his heart sink into his chest as he looked down at the table. “It seems all I know how to do is make people cry.”

He felt the pain in his head and stomach intensify. He couldn’t control his expression any longer. He clenched his teeth, furrowed his brow and narrowed his eyes.

He stood from the table and hopped to the crutches. He moved over to Amy’s right side and shifted the crutch to his right hand. He balanced on his right foot while leaning down and placing his arm around her shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Amy,” he said and squeezed her. “You’re not an idiot and you’re not stupid. From the time I knew what the feeling was, I’ve loved her. I don’t know if it’s going to work out with how things have been. But, you’re a wonderful person. I had a really good time tonight and I really liked your cooking. I wasn’t lying when I said you were beautiful. I don’t know what the future will be like, but I hope you’re still in it.”

He stood and pressed his muzzle against the top of her head with a kiss. “Thank you for having me over,” he whispered, then pulled his head back.

He shifted the crutch back and made his way to the door. Her chair shifted and she ran over to him. Her arms slapped around his waist and she hugged him.

“Thank you for coming over,” she cried.

She let go of his waist and ran down the hallway. It sounded like she jumped into her bed and began to quietly sob into her pillow.

“You’re welcome, sweetie. It was a wonderful first date. Good night,” he said and finagled his way out the door.

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

*Onnea sinulle: Good luck to you