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

Finnish translations at the end

Chapter 30. "A Woman's Heart"

He slowly crutched his way back to Seppo's. He still felt terrible for breaking her heart like that.

"She was such a sweet girl. And we had quite a bit in common," he thought and groaned a sigh. "Maybe if it really doesn't work out with Shari." He shook his head. "Maybe not anytime soon. You can't cross a bridge you just burned."

He walked into the door. Seppo was sitting at the table and was making a lot of noise. He was turning a crank that was attached to a drum and it sounded like rocks tumbling. He stopped turning the crank and looked up.

"Judging by the look on your face," he said, then looked down. He held up a small glass with a brown liquid. "Need a drink?"

"Yeah. Please," Vilkas said and moved over to the table. He sat and asked, "What's with this thing?"

Seppo had gotten up and moved to the counter. "Tumbling stones." He pulled a glass out and placed it in front of Vilkas, then poured - what smelled like - whiskey into the glass. "Takes several days to polish them after rounding them on a grinding wheel and hand drilling the holes."

He placed the bottle down and sat. He held out his glass and Vilkas acknowledged by tapping the glass with his own. Vilkas sipped the spirit and placed the glass down. He sighed as he looked at the table.

"It's not easy breaking a woman's heart, friend," Seppo said after a moment.

"Yeah. I would rather fight ten men than do that again," Vilkas grievously said.

"It's tougher on you when you're still a kid. While I'm glad she found something to catch her eye besides flowers..." Seppo shook his head and sipped his drink. "Poor kid," he whispered. "I'll check on her in the morning."

"Thank you, Seppo. Let me know how she's doing." Vilkas sipped the drink and stared into the glass.

"Sure."

"She's cute. Her dress and floral hair clips made her beautiful. Her quirks make her adorable and she's incredibly nice. We have our heightened senses in common. And she's a good cook."

"Paska to say it, but it never hurts to have a backup plan." Vilkas looked up at him, feeling a bit angry despite having a similar thought. "I don't mean the second you decide to move on from Shari. Nobody likes to be the backup plan...plan 'B'...second choice...what have you. That can feel worse than rejection. I know Shari doesn't have a number one, but I'm sure you feel like a number two."

"In more ways than one," Vilkas muttered and took a drink.

Seppo chuckled. "Ain't that the truth."

"I tried saying something to her before I left. She hugged me before I walked out the door and thanked me for coming. So, I guess there's that. I just feel awful. I just," he said and sighed as he held his aching head. "Shari's that first love. But, did I just make the right decision?" He rubbed his head. "Especially with everything she's said about falling for another patient and all the times I've hurt her..."

"Sometimes there are no right answers. One person can make something look easy while the next struggles with it. Life is hard, friend."

"Ain't that the truth," Vilkas said and finished the drink.

They spent a few hours talking before they finished the bottle and called it a night.

#####

Vilkas ate breakfast while Seppo went to check on Amy. Vilkas dressed and made his way over to the practice area. People were making their way over with him. He exchanged pleasantries and answered a few questions as they walked. A commotion could be heard up ahead. They rounded Alida's house to see why.

Thwip! Crack!
Cheers!
Thwip! Crack!
Cheers!

A small crowd was gathered behind a certain doctor as she aimed the bow and planted arrow after arrow into the inner circle of the target. Someone beside Vilkas called out to her. A person in the crowd turned to look over.

"Vilkas! Shari's over here killing your target! You should have her teach us!"

Shari slowly lowered the bow while easing the draw back to neutral. She was wearing a white, long-sleeved blouse with a light chain mail over it. She had a leather cuirass, gorget, layered spaulders, bracers, paneled skirt to her knees, and below the knee boots. The long-bladed dagger was on her hip hanging from her belt. Her left hand had a cloth-like, fingerless glove with a leather patch in the palm while her right hand had a similar glove with the first three fingers covered in leather. Typical archery gloves. A leather quiver lay by her feet with a few arrows stabbed in the ground in front of her.

She looked over at him with a scowl on her face. He looked away from her - feeling every bit of that look.

"That's her decision to make. I wouldn't mind the help, but I'm sure she's busy," Vilkas called back while glancing over at her.

"Is there *really* any helping you?" She asked rhetorically, smirking with a dagged glare.

"Sometimes I wonder," he muttered under his breath as he looked away.

He stayed away from and tried not to look at her as he waited for the rest of the villagers to show up.

"Vilkas," a familiar voice called from beside him.

He turned to see Ularn walking with a nervous-looking Nir beside him.

“Chief...Nir. Good morning.”

Ulnar motioned to Nir. “A new recruit for you.”

Nir scratched at his chest as he glanced away. “Just...don’t let my wife find out.” He looked at Vilkas very seriously. “Definitely not Socorro.”

Vilkas sighed quietly. “My lips are sealed. Go over by the...”

“You’re a dead man!” Shari called over.

Nir’s eyes went wide as he squealed and hid behind Ulnar.

“If you don’t go *right now* and tell her, *I will!*”

“Fine!” Nir yelled, his voice cracking. He peeked from around Ulnar. “I’m telling your father *you’re* out here!”

Shari growled. Nir shrieked like a young girl seeing a spider and ran off towards the pub.

“GET BACK HERE!” She yelled as she handed her bow off and gave chase. “COWARD!”

“Well...you *had* a new recruit,” Ulnar quipped.

Everybody cringed as Nir screeched as if he were dying. It reminded Vilkas of the time a pen of goats screamed as he passed.

“If anybody here doesn’t want to end up like him, I suggest you take this training seriously,” Vilkas warned.

“Poor guy,” someone compassionately said.

“She always been that scary?” Someone else asked and audibly shuddered.

“I’m constantly reminded to keep on her good side,” Vilkas added. “*That’s* one reason why. Another is that, being a doctor, I’m sure she could do worse than anything *I’ve* survived.” He made himself shudder. “Anyway, let’s get to training.”

Everybody separated into their respective areas. Vilkas had the melee users line up. A proxy - that did well yesterday - stood beside him and he showed them footwork and striking motions through them. Seppo showed up later to say Amy wasn't going to be around. She was doing okay, but was taking the day for herself and that she'd be back in the morning. Ularn followed Seppo away to oversee the remaining construction of the barricade and scouting/warning area.

Nir and Shari came back at lunch time with Valeska. Nir and Shari looked like scolded children while Valeska looked like a doting mother. As the two 'kids' helped serve the food, Valeska pulled Vilkas aside. She didn't look pleased.

"If either of those two get hurt out here or in the fight, after I'm done with you, you'll face my father," she warned him as tears welled up in her eyes. Her expression turned to worry. "Promise me they'll be safe."

"You know I can't do that," he softly said.

Her breath quivered as she breathed out and brought her hand to her mouth - tears leaving her eyes. "I know," she sobbed. She sniffled and wiped her cheeks. "Do your best to make sure they come back alive. You too, you big, dumb idiot."

"That's what I'm here to do," he tried to reassure, though he could only muster an uneasy smile.

"I know," she said and wiped her eyes. She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Thank you," she said and gave him a slightly hopeful smile.

"You're welcome."

She hugged him. They smiled at each other and joined the others for lunch.

After lunch, everybody was brought in and lined up for more footwork and weapon movement drills. He explained that the ranged unit still needed to be able to protect themselves in an emergency. They were given either a short sword or daggers to work with.

After several hours of correction and repetition, Vilkas had them split again. Shari called out that she would be helping with the ranged unit while Vilkas called out for the melee fighters to be equipped with armor and shields, then worked on striking the dummies. Though they met eyes several times, neither one spoke to the other. Meanwhile, the sawmill brought over a fresh batch of arrows.

Several times throughout the day, Vilkas felt the pain in his head and stomach flare up. He did his best to hide it, but couldn't keep from showing it in his face a couple of times. He noticed after lunch that his left foot was tingling. He decided to call it a day when he felt himself becoming exhausted. It was the only reason he could think to explain him walking towards someone and forgetting why he walked there.

His eyes felt heavy as he watched the weapons return to the carts and get locked up. He sighed heavily and began the trek to Seppo's house for a bath to, hopefully, refresh his energy. If that didn't help, he was going to lay down for a nap.

"Are you not staying for dinner?" One of the females asked.

He stopped and turned his muzzle to the side. "No. I think I'm going to take a bath and..."

"Was it *that* good that you're still full from last night?"

He looked over his shoulder. He felt a bit of anger rise within him.

"I saw you, you know. Did you sneak by the house and listen in to our conversation, too, or were you spying on me for another reason?"

"I'm not *that* petty," Shari said evenly. "I...*may* have overheard the conversation yesterday and I *may* have been a little curious to see if you were actually going. If it was just dinner, I think she'd be here. I assume you broke her heart for her to not show up."

He turned his head and gripped the crutches to move. "I wonder why *that* is," he muttered and began to walk away.

"You should have come to me if you're in pain, you know," she called to him, causing him to stop. "Even now it's written on your face," she said, her voice sounding closer. A hand touched his shoulder. "I don't care what our relationship is. If someone is in need of treatment, they come to me."

The crutch creaked under his tightening grip. He loosened it with a defeated sigh as he suppressed his anger. "I'm in pain. My foot started tingling today, too." He looked over at her. She had a worried look on her face.

"Take your bath. You look tired. I'll look at you before dinner," she said politely, then gave him a partial smile.

He nodded. "Alright."

She smiled wider. "I'll see you when you get there."

He watched as she walked away. He noticed her tail swaying more than usual. He shook his head and made his way towards Seppo's house.

"You skipping dinner again?" Seppo asked from his left.

Vilkas stopped and looked over at him. "Yeah. I've not been feeling well and someone noticed. I'm going to get checked out and," he looked away, "She's making dinner."

Seppo walked up to him and slapped his arm. "If tonight doesn't give you closure, it may be time to move on from that one. Onnea sinulle, friend."

"Thank you," he replied. "He sounded more hopeful than his speech," he thought and began moving again.

Vilkas *finally* got to the house. He drew the water for the bath without lighting the fire. A cold bath just sounded better.

He finished undressing when a strong pain caused him to double over. He fell to his knees as he stifled a cry of pain and crawled to the toilet. His stomach heaved and acid water spewed from his mouth. His stomach knotted several more times and nothing came up. He coughed and spit into the bowl. His stomach still didn't feel right. He turned and sat on his right hip to try and catch his breath and wipe the tears from his eyes. He grit his teeth and lifted himself onto the seat. He clenched his jaw and pushed as hard as he could. It felt as if a tree trunk slowly scraped through his rectum and finally passed. Tears filled his eyes as he gasped for breath. A few more good pushes freed his bowels and took much of the pain with it. As he caught his breath and the blood left his face, he reached up and sent the bowel demon to its final resting place.

As he sank into the tub, he felt his fatigue melt away with the pain in his arms and backside. He scrubbed with the soap and rinsed off. He lay back and rested his head against the wall.

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"Why are you here!?"

“Huh?” I looked around and didn’t see anything.

“WHY...ARE...YOU...HERE!?” The voice bellowed.

A strange man was running towards me. The area slowly lit up as if several candles were lit. He was a bit smaller than me, but he was a gray wolf as well. He was a bit strange. He had wings and his eyes glowed a dark blue. His eyes were dark blue with bits of white and a lighter blue seemingly flowing within them. He was staring at me - a look of sheer horror with his ears to his head and his mouth slightly open while he breathed.

“Did I fall asl-...”

“NO!” He yelled as he brought his hands up and clutched his hair. His fur gradually became black as he began to pace around. “No no no no no no NO NO NO!!!” He stopped in front of me and dropped his hands. “Something must’ve...”

#####

“VILKAS!!!”

Vilkas gasped for air as he sat up. Water splashed around him as he grabbed his chest and breathed heavily.

“Wear yourself out today? I thought you were going to Shari’s for dinner?” Seppo asked, sounding deeply concerned.

“I fell asleep?” Vilkas asked as he turned and looked at Seppo. His breathing calmed, but his heart kept a quick pace.

Seppo wore a look of concern. “I’d say,” he huffed and stood, placing his hands on his hips. “I called and shook you for several minutes.” He put a hand to his chest and took a breath, then blew it out of his mouth. The concern left his face. “I’m glad I stopped by before getting a drink. You scared the tail off me, friend!”

Vilkas squeezed his eyes shut and ran his hand down his face. “I know I was tired, but I...” He flashed open his eyes and stared at his hand.

“Be that as it may, you need to get your nauta moving.” Seppo reached over and grabbed a towel. “She invites you to dinner - you don’t keep the lady waiting.”

"Right. Sorry," Vilkas said and grabbed the towel.

"Tell her what you told me. Have her look you over just in case."

Vilkas dried off as Seppo held out another towel.

"You, uh...supposed to be stepping on that foot?" Seppo asked with worry.

Vilkas looked down and noticed the long scar along his shin. "Fucking thing went numb!" He shouted and stamped his foot several times.

"Lopeta!" Seppo shouted and slid his foot under Vilkas'. Vilkas glared at him. Seppo glared back. "I'm tempted to lyö maku suustasi, nauta!"

Vilkas narrowed his eyes in confusion. "What?"

Seppo rolled his eyes and sighed. "Just...dry off...get dressed...*crutches*...and leave."

Seppo threw the towel at Vilkas and left the room. The door to the house slammed shut. Vilkas finished drying off and hung the towels, then grabbed his clothes. He limped to the crutches and went into his room. He threw the clothes on the bed and looked around for others. The other clothes were in a pile against the wall. A set of clothes was neatly folded on an empty bookshelf. He wasn't sure where they came from, but it was a nice gray shirt and black, pleated pants. He quickly dressed and made his way over to Shari's.

He felt his eyelids become heavy and his breathing became labored as he moved past the pub. He stood outside of Shari's door and held his forehead in his palm while catching his breath. He closed his eyes for a moment - his head dipping lower and lower.

"I'll get the door," Shari called from inside.

The door opened and he pried his eyes open. He could see blurry white toes in front of him. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them several times until they became clear.

"Get your ass in here and get on the cot. *Now!*" Shari commanded and stepped aside.

He moved his hand to the crutch and staggered across the threshold.

“Darijus!” She cried with concern. “Talk to me dammit!” She continued, her voice wavering.

“I...hah...just need...huff...to sit,” he eked out as he slowly made his way past her.

He could feel her hand on his back as he moved down the hallway and into the room. He turned and fell onto the cot. Shari quickly grabbed the crutches and put them aside.

“Gkk, uuuh,” he grunted as his stomach clenched and his head throbbed. He held his head and nearly doubled over to the pain.

“Dammit! This is all my fault,” she muttered as she rummaged through the hutch.

She came back by him and grabbed his left arm.

“Fuck this damn shit!” He yelled as he ripped his hand free and slammed his fist into his left thigh.

“Vilkas, please calm down,” she said calmly, her voice trembling.

Something clacked against her teeth as she reached out. She carefully grabbed his wrist and unbuttoned the cuff. He continued to grunt through his pained expression while she rolled the sleeve up his arm. She tied his bicep with a cloth and moved his arm by his side. She moved in front of him and knelt down. He watched as she rubbed the crook of his elbow, then pulled the needle from her teeth. She carefully pricked his arm and plunged the contents into his arm.

“Give it a second and you should feel better,” she said and caressed his cheek. He saw her hands move down and prod around his injured leg. “Have you been walking on this? Does this hurt?”

“No,” he breathed out as he felt the pain gradually subside.

“Is that “no” to both or...”

“No and no,” he said as he sat up a bit. “I can’t feel that.”

"I'm not sure what that means, sweetie," she said as she looked up at him with concern.

He closed his eyes as he continued to labor his breathing. He felt her fingers press into his wrist.

"Either you ran over here or you're infected. Dammit!"

She rummaged through the hutch again and came back a moment later. She pricked his arm again.

"This isn't meant to go in your veins, per se, but if it's that bad, then I don't have a choice."

She rummaged in the cabinet again and pricked his arm once more.

"This won't be as strong as before, but it should calm you down so I can get some food into you." He felt her hand caress his muzzle and she kissed his nose. "I don't think I've ever injected all of these at once. Either I just placed you in a coma or you should feel better." He felt her hands slide under his jaw and her head press into his. "I'm such a horrible person. I'm so sorry, Darijus." She whispered to him.

The pain numbed to a tolerable ache and his heart slowed down. He finally caught his breath. He reached up and held her hand against his muzzle. Something dropped onto his fur and slid down his face. She sniffled and kissed the top of his muzzle.

"Let's get some food in you. Okay?" She whispered.

He gave a lazy nod and let his hand drop from hers. She kissed his muzzle again and slid her hands from his jaw. He opened his eyes a bit and reached out for his crutches. She intercepted his hand and began to pull. She pulled his body over and he planted his right foot. He made it to his foot and straightened up. She placed his crutches under his arms and stood to the side with her hand on his back.

His movement was still shaky, but he made it to the table and handed her the crutches. He sat on the bench and his head lazily angled towards the table. He heard her making some noise by the counter. He pulled his muzzle back when she placed a bowl of greens and other vegetables in front of him.

"Thank...hah."

“Just eat. Thank me later,” she said, sounding like a mother.

He picked up his fork and stabbed into the bowl. He shoved the fork into his mouth and pulled the contents free. The flavors were a little bit everywhere. He looked into the bowl as he chewed. Dark green leaves, green peppers, peas, bean-looking things, tomatoes, small orange slices that were sweet, grapes, and raisins. The dressing was a bit sweet and darkened whatever it touched.

He swallowed and stabbed again. “Hmm,” he hummed as he chewed again.

“Thank you,” she murmured and began to eat herself.

He glanced over at her as he chewed. Her eyes were watery and her face was down-turned in a mix of sadness and concern. He wasn’t sure if she was chewing or her jaw was quivering.

He looked back at his bowl. He stabbed and chewed until it was empty - save the round bits that refused to be stabbed. He set down his fork and slid his bowl over to her. She swallowed and looked from the bowl to him.

“More?”

He nodded and pulled his arm back. His stomach attacked the food like a pack of his younger self. He grunted and held his stomach as it twisted and turned.

“Here you are, sweetie,” Shari said softly as she placed another bowl in front of him.

He rested for a moment until the pack settled down. Shari came back and placed a mug in front of him. He picked it up and took a large gulp of it.

“Has Seppo been feeding you?” She asked and giggled.

Vilkas stabbed his fork in the bowl and brought it up to his mouth. “Hhh-omp!” He pulled the fork from his mouth and chewed with soft moans escaping his throat.

“Th-that was,” she began and sat, “A joke,” she finished while looking down at the table, sounding disappointed. “Well, anyway, like I said, you looked tired. I thought, maybe, being off the diet was affecting you. Major changes in diet...can...” She trailed

off as she looked up at him. "I heard ferals react poorly to extreme changes in diets!" She exclaimed cheerfully.

"Mmf-mmfm," he hummed while slightly nodding.

"I...I'll just shut up and eat," she muttered and picked up her fork.

Vilkas continued to devour the salad. He stabbed everything he could until there were nothing but difficult round objects left. He set down his fork and lifted the bowl to roll them all into his muzzle. He held the bowl as he chewed. He swallowed and began to lick out the bowl with enthusiasm.

"Dari-...are you serious!?" Shari cried in disbelief through her food. "Boot it down, ya goof," she chuckled. She swallowed and said, "There's plenty left to eat. Honest."

"Fluh?" Came out of his mouth as he stopped licking and looked over at her. He lowered the bowl and swallowed as she giggled. He looked at the bowl. "*Phew*," he breathed out. "For a minute there, I lost myself."

She chuckled. "Was it really that good?"

He looked over at her. "Yeah. It's *really* good."

"If you wo-...", she began and looked at her bowl. "Everything tonight is known to help with lethargy." She got up from the table and took his bowl.

"What's that?"

"It's feeling sluggish. Lack of energy, in other words," she said and placed a plate in front of him.

The plate had a cut up steak, orange-looking potatoes and beans. He stabbed a piece of the steak and shoved it in his mouth. The outside had a slight crisp to it that was packed with flavor. The inside was juicy and practically melted between his teeth.

"So good," he breathed out.

She smiled brightly. "I'm glad."

She brought over a plate for herself and began eating.

He tried some of the potatoes. They were slightly sweet. It contrasted nicely with the salt and butter flavor. The beans were a dark red and, well, tasted like beans.

They ate in silence, but he could see her stealing glances at him. She seemed nervous for some reason.

He set down his fork and put his hand on his stomach. "I don't know what you killed, but this was it," he said happily.

"Pfft!" She spit out some of her potatoes. She chuckled and covered her mouth. "Was that an attempt at humor or were you serious?" She wiped her lips with her middle finger.

He sighed contentedly as he closed his eyes. "No. You killed it. Nailed it. On the nose. Bulls-..."

"I get it! Got it!" She exclaimed as she chuckled. "Was it better than Ay-..." She cut herself off and dropped her hand as she looked at her plate. "Jealousy about got me," she murmured.

"Hmm?" He hummed and looked over at her.

She narrowed her eyes and looked at him. "You feeling any better?" She asked out of concern.

"Yeah," he said and sighed. "Still a bit tired, but I think the pain is gone."

"Okay. You start feeling worse, you know what to do."

"Tell my doctor friend," he said and smiled.

"Eht?" Escaped her. She groaned as she let out her breath while appearing discouraged and looked at her plate. "That what that feels like?" She asked under her breath.

"Hmm?"

She narrowed her eyes and looked at him. She looked back at her plate. "Nothing."

He placed his fork on his plate and finished off his juice. He pushed the both close to her.

“Thank you for dinner. And, thank you in advance for picking up after my crippled self,” he said genuinely.

“You’re very welcome, Darijus,” she said and gave him a pleasant smile. She tilted her head to the side a bit. “Do you, maybe, have enough energy to move a bit more tonight?”

“Yeah,” he said and sat upright. “What’s up?”

She appeared to bite her lip and she looked nervous as she stared at her plate. She glanced at him a few times. “Do you, maybe, want to, perhaps, go outside and, maybe, sit under the stars for a bit?”

Her glancing seemed like peeking. He could see her shoulders move a bit as if she were doing something under the table. Her eyes seemed to flounder between hopeful and nervous.

He looked at the window behind her, then over at her. “I haven’t done that in a *looong* time. Let’s do it,” he said eagerly.

Her expression morphed into one of pure joy. He leaned in a bit and tilted his head so he could see her tail swaying slightly behind her.

“When did she learn that, I wonder?” He thought as he used his tongue as a toothpick.

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

*Nauta: Ass, blockhead, etc.

*Lopeta: Stop it

*Lyö maku suustasi: Beat the taste out of your mouth