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

Chapter 31. “Together”

Shari collected the dishes and quickly washed them. She rinsed out the pans she cooked in and let them soak with a bit of the cleaning fluid. She leaned over at the end of the counter and picked up a basket covered with a cloth. She turned and gave him a smile.

He was finally able to look at her properly. She wasn't wearing her glasses. Her hair was in a large braid going down the back with a white ribbon at the end. Her bangs were collected to the sides with three small, white ribbons spaced out on each side. Another white ribbon was around her right ear with the bow in the front.. Her dress was navy blue, tight to her body and ended mid thigh at a silky hem. He couldn't see the top under the navy blue crocheted shawl, but he could see her torso and legs move under the fabric. The sides were split from her mid-thigh up to the top of her hips.

“You're staring,” she said, doing a poor job of hiding her smile.

“Also breathless,” he said and finally tore his eyes off her body to her eyes.

“Roll your tongue back in and let's head out back.”

He turned and stood from the table. She handed him the crutches and he placed them under his arms. She opened the door and stepped aside. She watched as he moved through the door and went outside.

He felt much better. He didn't feel exhausted, he was moving better, and the pain was barely noticeable.

He turned to see her close the door. She was carrying an unlit candle in a holder. He turned past the wood pile and to the back of the house. He stopped when he saw a blanket spread out on the ground with two more candles in holders on either side of it. She caught up to him and placed the basket on the blanket near one of the candles.

"Take a seat," she said as she turned to him. "You can sit next to the house so you can lean against it and stretch your legs."

He moved over to the house and placed the crutches against it. He balanced on his good foot as he knelt down and reached his hand out over the blanket. He fell onto the blanket and crawled to the middle, then adjusted himself so that he was leaning against the house with his legs out in front of him.

Shari placed the candle next to the basket and moved to the middle of the blanket. She turned her body and looked around before she knelt down and placed her knees onto the blanket. Vilkas glanced around as well, wondering what she was looking for. It was quiet and all the lights in the village were out.

He looked over at her. She was sitting back on her heels and looking up. He looked up with her. The moon was full and very bright tonight. The cloudless sky revealed every star you could hope for.

He lowered his muzzle and looked over at her. She was looking at the blanket in front of her. Her right hand trembled as it reached up and grabbed the shawl. She slowly pulled the end from over her left shoulder, then her shaky left hand reached up and pulled the other end from over her right shoulder. She wadded it up and tossed it by the basket.

She had revealed an over the shoulder top with a large silky strip that stretched from her upper left bicep, over her ample cleavage to her upper right bicep. Her hands still trembled in loose fists upon her thighs.

"Gorgeous," he muttered, unable to keep his eyes off of her.

"Th-thank you," she said, sounding uneasy. "I *may* have had this made for..." she said as her eyes moved across the blanket.

She growled and slammed her fists into her thighs into her thighs. Her teeth were all visible and clenched together so tight the muscle bulged beneath her fur. Her eyes were watering and she seemed angry.

"Why?" She finally asked, her voice wavering. "Why is it so hard to be honest with you?" Her body began to tremble.

He wanted to comfort her. He wanted to hold her. His heart ached for her. "Shari it's..."

"No," she said with authority. She looked up at him. "Please...please let me speak. I *have* to do this. I *have* to..."

She trailed off as tears freed themselves from her eyes. She sniffled and wiped her eyes and cheeks with the backs of her hands. She looked back down at the blanket in her original position.

"I was terrified when you kicked down my door. I held my knife to you and yelled such horrible things. But, you didn't attack me. You just...*stood* there...staring at me like you are now. Like you always do. Kind eyes. Such kind eyes." She chuckled even though her face looked as pained as her words. "You called me "beautiful". It was so...genuine. Like you always do. I hadn't been called that and...and *felt* it...ever!"

She raised her hand to wipe her eyes again.

"You said you were glad I was safe. A-and I *still* yelled at you because I was so...frightened. I was a coward then and I'm a coward now." She sniffled. "After you fell, I was going to leave you there. I stepped around the table and got to the door. When I looked outside, there were bodies in the street. Your voice...it didn't hit me until then that you were the one talking to Socorro. I was *still* afraid of you even as I was pulling you into the other room."

She sniffled and wiped her eyes again.

"I thought I made a mistake saving you when I woke up to you strangling me. I asked you those questions because one of the other doctors in Lyneda told me a rumor that Ensio was asking mercenaries their rates for killing people. He stopped asking around and they both stopped with the stares of hatred after their son was born. I was still afraid that he'd go through with it. But, when I returned there after you saved Socorro, they pulled me aside and they both apologized to me. Their son is a cutie."

She smiled for a moment. She sighed deeply and swallowed.

"A-anyway, I left the room and did some thinking. I was still afraid of you, but I didn't think you were a bad guy. You even," she said and giggled. "You told me how to properly hold someone hostage." She kept a smile for a moment before it faded. "You didn't run like I kinda hoped you would. I found you in my room and...and," she stammered as tears streamed down her face. "That's...that's when I..."

She growled again and slammed her fists to her thighs. She pressed her lips together and her chest heaved as she breathed through her nose. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. She wiped her eyes and cheeks, then was motionless for a moment. She opened her eyes and looked at him with purpose. She stood up and pulled the ribbon from her ear and tossed it by the basket. She lowered her hands and grabbed the bottom hem of her dress. She took another breath and looked at him kindly with a smile as she let it out.

She looked around again. She took a breath and reached up to her left shoulder with her right hand. She slid her arm free of the cuff, then did the same for the other side. He felt his heart slam in his chest, his eyes widen and his groin tighten a little as he watched her pull the dress up over her head and drop it to her side. She was standing in the moonlight, underneath the stars, out in the open...completely naked. Her left arm crossed her breasts and her right hand went to her groin.

“Dammit! No!” She growled through her clenched teeth.

She looked at him and took a deep breath. Her hands trembled as she slowly dropped them to her side. She swallowed and raised her hands out to the side and slowly turned. When she was facing away from him, she lifted her tail to the side. She put her arms back out and completed the turn. She sighed as she lowered her arms.

“I’m no longer hiding anything from you, Darijus. I love you.”

He leaned forward a little, his mouth parted, his heart was testing the strength of his rib cage as he couldn’t believe what he just heard or why she had to go this far just to say it.

“I fell in love with you as you cried in my arms.” She glanced away. “I wasn’t sure if I was just pitying you, so I wanted to see what happened next.” She looked back at him. “Every time I said, ‘Just this once,’ I was testing my love for you. I was trying to figure you out, see what kind of person you were and protect myself at the same time.” She huffed a chuckle. “You know, I spent all day yesterday planning this and all day today just...afraid of how it would turn out.”

She shifted on her feet and swallowed.

“I love how genuine you are when you talk about your mother. I love how easy it was to talk to you even if I didn’t really know who you were. I love how comfortable you tried to make things when they seemed complicated to you...a-and me. I love how you

try to understand anything you don't know. I love how hard you tried to hide your anger around me. I love how compliment me and my cooking even if you don't realize it or didn't understand what it meant. I love how humble you are when being praised. I love how honest you are. I love our playful banter even when you didn't realize you were doing it at the time. I love how accepting you were of me and *are* of me through all the shit I've put you through."

She cleared her throat and swallowed.

"It devastated me when you left the house and I felt even worse when I found out you couldn't read. I was so mad at myself for not just being upfront and clear with you that I wanted you to stay or to come home with me that night. I wasn't mad at you when you left the second time. I was mad at myself for putting you in that situation - for getting you beat up by my father. I loved how composed you stayed, though."

"I love how brave you are. I love how selfless you are. I love how my touch can calm you down from a nightmare or when you're angry. I love how you don't get mad at my insults like 'stupid, ignorant meathead'. I love how you look at me...the way you look at me. I love how you trust me to give you weird drinks or shots without asking what it is."

She giggled and smiled at him. "I would be lying if I didn't say I loved every second of our time in the tub or the time in the bed. Or that time you hugged me from behind..." She giggled again as she covered her mouth. Her eyes seemed very seductive. "I was, maybe, kinda, sorta..." She closed her eyes and sighed as she lowered her hand. "I was thinking about *you* when you kept interrupting my masturbating, you jerk!"

She giggled, then opened her eyes and looked at him with a smile. "I love how defenseless you seem around me. I love how you opened up to me. I melted a little more each time you told me you loved me."

He looked down at the blanket. "I thought I imagined it with how you brushed it aside."

"Mm-mmm," she hummed.

He looked up at her as she held her eyes closed and shook her head. She looked at him again.

"You said it and my heart skipped every time. Even when you were learning about it, my heart skipped when you thought we loved each other. It skipped again when you said you liked me. I was so happy. But, I was still..." She looked down in front of her. "I was still guarding myself. My mind was still shielding my heart. I was afraid of being hurt so much that I kept pushing you away."

She looked up and swiped her tongue across her lips.

"It hurt, you know. When you said those things to me. I couldn't say anything back because I was so hurt. I wasn't just after you for your body. I genuinely wanted to. I held myself back just for that moment. I didn't want to teach you. I wanted to show you that I loved you."

She looked away. "Even then, I was guarding myself so much that I treated you like shit. I wrote that word on your workbook to let you know exactly what I was doing so that, maybe, you would figure it out. And part of me felt like you did." She looked back at him. "I'm so sorry I treated you like that. I deserved being called a hypocrite. I wasn't treating you like a fool. I wasn't sure how much you knew, so I *had* to treat you like a child and start from the beginning with a lot of things. I was well over the fact you choked me - especially when you held me because you thought I was gone in your nightmare. I felt so loved and appreciated. There were so many times I wanted to confess how I really felt."

She brought her hands up to her chest over her heart. "It hurt...so-so-so much when you said I healed your heart just to break it. I have never felt like such...scum. Worse than scum! Never in my life have I felt so *terrible* of a person. And, you were right. I was wearing a mask. You saw right through me. I was treating you with such two-faced double-standards that I am forever ashamed of how I treated you."

She lowered her hands and stepped in front of him. She knelt down and planted her knees on the blanket. She reached out and grabbed his left hand, then brought it over her heart. He could feel how fast it was beating.

"I love your ear. I love your arm. I love your scars. I can look beyond your past. I want to look to our future. Together. I love you so much. I want you in my life. I want to start a family with you. I want to nurse each other back to health when we're sick. I want to get through the tough times and enjoy the good times. I want to cuddle with you after a hard day. I want us to look at each other like lovers. I want to treat each other like lovers. I love you so much that I don't...I *can't* spend another day without you."

She swallowed and ran her tongue along her lips as her eyes watered. "If you can find it in your heart to forgive this scared little girl and move forward in your life with a happy wife, please, just..."

He leaned forward and kissed her. He could feel her lips quiver against his. She sniffled and pulled away from him. Tears fell from her eyes, her whole body was quaking, and her lips and face were twisted in anguish.

He pulled his hand back and squeezed hers. "Shari, I do," he said and smiled warmly.

"Darijus," she cried and leapt forward, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He rubbed her back as she cried into the side of his neck. "I'm sorry for saying those things to you. It hurt so much when the words left my mouth. It hurt even more when I heard you crying out for me that night when you were sick. It hurt so much that it wasn't just my voice that was howling. It hurt just as much when I heard you crying after saying those awful things to you."

He kissed her neck. "I love you, Shari. I want you to be my first and last love. I want all those things you said for us. I want to be with you every day - together - until we die."

He hugged her. He squeezed her and nuzzled her neck, then continued to hold her as she sobbed. He looked out at the end of the field as a family of feral deer walked towards the river. He smiled and looked up at the stars.

Shari sniffled and sighed. She pulled away from him and looked into his eyes. She smiled happily. He smiled back. They both closed their eyes as their muzzles came together. Their lips separated with a '*smooch*' and came together again. After another '*smooch*', they pulled their muzzles back and stared at each other with warm smiles.

"I love you," Shari whispered.

"I love you," Vilkas whispered back.

After several moments of staring at each other, she glanced down. "I better put some clothes on if I'm going to be outside," she whispered and giggled.

"Or I can join you," he whispered suggestively.

She giggled again. "Let's wait to get back in the house, lover."

She kissed him again, then placed her head on his shoulder and sighed happily. She nuzzled his neck and kissed it. He kissed her forehead and leaned back against the house, then tilted his head on top of hers - sighing happily himself. He closed his eyes.

"Weren't you going to put clothes on?" He whispered.

"I don't wanna move," she whispered back.

"What's in the basket?"

"Treats and drinks."

"Treats?"

Shari groaned and pushed away from him. "You're right. Treats are now, cuddling is a lifetime."

She stood and put her dress back on. She knelt down to her knees and pulled the cloth from over the basket. She reached in and pulled out a thin piece of a dried corn husk and used a striker to light one end of it. She lit one of the candles and flipped the husk until the flame went out. She used the candle to light the others and set the third in the middle of the blanket.

Shari stood and grabbed the basket and placed it next to the house. She sat next to him and reached into the basket. She pulled out a large bottle and a corkscrew. She screwed the device into the cork and carefully pulled the cork out. She placed the cork and corkscrew back in the basket, then pulled out a wine glass. She poured some of the contents into the glass and passed it over to him.

He brought it up to his nose. It had a very fruity smell with a hint of spice to it. Shari pulled out a small plate with a slice of white cake with white frosting and sliced strawberries mixed in and garnishing it. Vilkas put down the glass and took the plate she handed over.

"I don't think I've had something sweet before. Except Rochus' sweet toast for breakfast and that juice or fruit," he said as he looked at the cake.

"You had Rochus' famous sweet toast? I'm jealous," Shari said as she took out another slice of the cake. "It's so good," she said while pulling out a couple of forks. She

looked over at him and seemed to think. "I'm an idiot, aren't I?" She asked as she looked at him. "Not sure how I expected you to eat this."

He placed the plate on his thigh. "It should be fine as long as I don't have to cut into it."

"Be careful. You drop it, you miss out on delicious."

"I'll be careful. Thank you."

He took a fork from her and stabbed into the cake. It had a soft, buttery texture to the cake and a creamy, buttery vanilla taste to the frosting. The strawberries were sweet and fresh.

"This is incredible."

"Nir's mother is a national treasure."

He grabbed his glass and took a sip. The initial hit was like pepper and herbs. After he swallowed, it left a taste of blackberry and raspberry behind.

"The wine is good, too. I could drink that all night."

"Not on that pain medication, you won't."

"Fair enough. Or was that a challenge?"

Shari dabbed her finger in her frosting and smeared it on his nose while giggling. "Unless you want a bad hangover or are trying to kill yourself, I don't recommend it."

He looked at her feeling less than enthused. He snaked his tongue out and lapped at his nose.

She burst out laughing. "Are you freaking kidding me right now?" She asked and laughed more.

"What?" He asked between laps at his nose.

Shari contained her laughter as she looked at him. He swallowed and looked at her with slight confusion. Shari reached over and smeared more of the frosting on his nose, then burst out laughing while leaning away. He sighed and covered his finger with

the frosting. Her laughing fit subsided and she looked over in time for him to tap her nose. She sighed and glared at him.

“Seriously?” She asked as she began to raise her left hand.

He reached over and stopped her hand. “Nope. Your turn,” he said, looking at her seriously.

“I don’t,” she began and sighed again.

She stared down her nose and stuck out her tongue. She arched it up and touched just under her nostrils. Vilkas snorted.

“You jerk!” She cried and slapped his right arm.

He began his own fit of laughter as she reached up and wiped her nose of the topping. He looked over in time to stop her hand from bringing the rest of the cake over by him.

“Whoa! That’s a bit much,” he said through chuckles. He took his fork and cut off a piece of the cake. “It’s supposed to be like this,” he said as he grabbed the bite and brought it over to her.

She pulled her muzzle back and gave him an uncertain look. She glanced from the cake bite to his eyes and back. She slowly opened her mouth and he gently pressed it into her muzzle. She slithered her tongue out to lick her lips and began chewing. She swallowed and stared at him. She looked down and cut off a bite of her own cake and held it out for him. He opened his muzzle and took the bite into his mouth. It fell towards the back of his tongue. He tried to close his muzzle, but found her finger. He looked at her. Her chest rocked as she breathed. He wrapped his lips around her finger and drew his muzzle back.

“I don’t know where you learned that, but that was pretty sensuous,” she said softly.

“I don’t know what that means, but it sounds like a good thing.”

She nodded her head slowly. “Keep that up and I’ll be taking off *your* clothes.”

He cut off another bite of the cake and held it up by her muzzle. “Don’t want to waste the cake, though.”

She smiled and huffed out from her nose as she tilted her head. "You're right. Cake is now, sex is later."

She took the bite from his fork and happily chewed.

They exchanged bites of cake until it was gone. Shari sighed as she leaned against the house. They sipped their wine as they looked up at the stars in silence. After a few more glasses, it was decided to head back inside for bed.

They were up for about another hour. It started with Shari pushing him onto her bed and ravaging his clothes. Passionate lovemaking followed. The night was capped off in each other's arms.

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Shari prepared breakfast in the morning. After eating, she went over to Seppo's to grab Vilkas' clothes - since she ruined his new shirt and pants. After dressing, Shari prepared a basket with some snacks to try and stave off his lethargy. After a kiss, they made their way over to the training grounds.

Vilkas was watching the others get suited up and grab their weapons. Ularn showed up in full scale armor with a large battle hammer and a shield. Seppo was beside him wearing lighter leather armor with a rapier on one hip and a main gauche on the other.

Shari began the archer training. Today they were working on long distance shots and adjusting for the wind.

He glanced to his right when something moved in his peripheral. A female squirrel walked towards the others with purpose in her steps. She was dark gray and white with black features. She was wearing a black sleeveless shirt, a black miniskirt and calf-high, black leather boots. She looked over at him and back.

"Another new person?" He thought. "I wasn't aware of that. I can't help the feeling I've seen her before." He shook his head and began to plan what they would be doing.

Shari pulled him aside at lunch.

"Are you okay?" She asked in a hushed tone.

"Yeah. I'm okay."

"I just didn't know if you felt...you know," she said and trailed off. She seemed disturbed about something.

"I'm okay. I was feeling the worst a few hours after lunch so..."

"That's," she said and looked away. "That's not what I meant, but I'll make sure to see you in a few hours then." She looked back at him. "I was talking about Amy. I feel a bit awkward because of...you know."

Vilkas looked over at the people sitting at the table. "I don't..."

Shari brought her hands up to either side of his face and stared into his eyes. "Are you *sure* you're feeling okay? Darijus, she's sitting at the end of the row staring at us right now about to burst into tears."

He glanced over and made eyes with the one in question. She quickly looked away from him. He looked back at Shari.

"The new girl? She's very good with the daggers. Her footwork is very..."

"That's Amy, you jerk!" Shari yelled quietly at him.

He glanced over again. He felt a sinking feeling in his chest and began to feel uncomfortable. Almost afraid. He looked back at Shari.

"Shari, I don't know what's going on," he said quietly with his voice wavering. His eyes began to water. "I saw her, but I didn't recognize her. I've been having moments where I go to do something and forget why I went there. Last night, when you were saying certain things, it's like I'd forgotten all about it." He brought his hand up over hers. "Shari...I don't know what's wrong with me. It scares me."

"Sweetie, you're scaring *me*. I'm about to cry," she whispered, then sniffled. "Look, I think I'll give you some of the pain meds, then you should go and take a nap somewhere. With how tired you've been, you may just be stressed out and worried because you're still injured and with everything else that's going on..."

Shari sniffled and wiped his eyes with her thumbs. He looked at her and nodded.

"Yeah. Let's do that. Maybe I'm just tired."

He sighed. Shari wiped her eyes and smiled.

“Okay. Let’s eat, then I’ll give you the shot. You take a nap. They’re just striking the dummies. Thomas can watch over them. It’ll be okay.”

“Is *that* his name?” He asked and groaned as he lowered his muzzle.

Shari ran her hand across the top of his head. “It’ll be okay. We just need to get your strength back. With all of this happening on top of moving around after being in bed for a few months, it’s no wonder you’re tired.”

He looked back up at her and nodded. “You’re right.”

“Get your strength back, sweetie. We got this,” she said and smiled warmly.

“Yeah.”

“Has anyone seen Marcus?” Someone from the table asked. “I haven’t seen him since the night of the announcement dinner.”

Everyone looked at each other, then shook their heads or said they haven’t.

“Who’s Marcus?” Vilkas asked.

“Edmund’s son,” Shari said. “Edmund was the butcher.”

“I just got a really bad feeling, Shari.”

“That makes two of us. They weren’t always the nicest people, but...” Shari smiled and caressed his cheek. “Don’t worry about it. He was wanting to leave here anyway. Just in case, I’ll talk to Val tonight and have her keep an ear open. Okay?”

“Yeah. Let’s just eat,” he said and smiled.

After lunch, Shari pulled him aside and administered the shot.

“There you go. Now,” she said and stroked his head across his good ear. “Go get some rest.”

“Shari,” he said and held out his hand. “I want you to have this.”

She cupped her hands under his. "What's this?"

He dropped the item into her hand. "A good luck charm, I guess."

Shari held up the tiger eye stone bracelet. "Why are you giving me this?"

He smirked. "It seems it's lost its effect on me. Maybe it will help you more than me. Besides," he said and leaned up to kiss her. "I'm about two months late on your birthday present."

"Thank you, Darijus. I guess...I guess I never told you when it was."

"It was on a day you were gone. *That* much I know. Valeska stopped by one day, but never said why. She forgot that you had left that morning." He reached over and caressed her cheek. "When this is all over, I'll get you something better."

She smiled and leaned in to kiss him. "I look forward to it. Now, go. Rest."

"Can do."

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Four days passed. Vilkas was feeling better and had more energy. The pain in his head and stomach continued, but Shari was helping him manage the pain. He found his memory wasn't failing him quite as often. The villagers were getting much better. Shari was even having the archers work on speed shots and running shots. The sawmill created wooden melee weapons so that they could start with mock battles. As good as this all made everyone feel, the air was still thick with doubts and concerns.

A rotation was created to man the scouting post. A mock drill was done one night to make sure everyone knew what to do when the time came.

It seemed they had done all they could to prepare. Vilkas woke up from a brief nap after lunch and began to make his way back to the training site.

"It's awfully quiet," he thought as he rounded the corner. He looked over at a crowd that had gathered by Alida's house. "What's going on over there?"

Vilkas moved to the crowd. A group of about ten armed men were off to the side while one of them was speaking with Ularn and Seppo.

“Amy, what’s going on?” He quietly asked her.

She turned around with a terrified look in her eyes. “Vilkas!” She cried and threw her arms around him.

He retained his balance and placed his arm around her. “Easy now. What’s going on?”

Amy sniffled. “They’re coming!”

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