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

Chapter 12. "Shari"

"How come you didn't tell me my face looks like this!?" Shari called from her bedroom as he drew bath water for her.

He looked over as she stomped into the washroom doorway.

She held her right hand in front of her neck using her whole hand to point. She chuckled and said, "I mean...seriously?" She giggled and moved her hand to her side.

He shrugged his shoulders and stopped the flow of water.

"Smiling, laughing...now shrugging innocence," she said and smiled brightly. "You won't be feral for much longer, Mr. Wolf." She made her way back in the bedroom and closed the door.

He could hear her chuckle in her room as he checked the fire under the tub. He walked to the dining room table and sat down. He reached behind him and grabbed his tail. He chuckled when he recalled the way she laughed when she saw it. The smell of the meat cooking was making his mouth water. He swallowed almost a full mouthful of saliva. He thought he might've had to use his sleeve on to wipe his mouth. He decided to set the table with the plates and utensils. He saw a flash of Shari as she dashed from her room to the washroom. He stared at the hallway.

"Was she...naked?" He thought as his heart beat faster and his face warmed.

He looked at the table and waited. He could hear Shari hum and the water move around as she washed. After a while, he heard her step from the tub. A few minutes later she opened the door and stepped out. She had a towel around her body and one around her head.

"She makes anything look good," he thought as he quickly looked away.

"You eating that for dinner?" She asked and nodded at the table.

He looked down and saw he was covering the plate with saliva. He could see a short strand hanging from the right corner of his mouth and a strand that connected from his mouth to the plate on the left.

"Dammit!" He cursed himself. "I look foolish." He gulped and wiped his mouth with his hand.

She giggled and said, "Go ahead and get in the bath. I'll clean that up for you. I'll take it as a compliment."

"Sorry. And thank you," he said and got up from the table.

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Shari moved the roast onto the table. He had to keep swallowing to keep from drooling. She moved some of the fat strips to the other end of the roast and stuck a fork into the meat. Juices pooled around the tines and the meat pulled apart easily. She used a knife to make even slices before serving them into the plates. She buttered a couple of rolls and placed one on his plate.

He cut into a slice of the meat and brought it up to his mouth. He felt a drip of drool leave his mouth and off his chin.

"I'm starting to understand you a bit better," Shari said from across the table. "With your demeanor, your heightened senses and...your..." she said and quickly bit into her roll and chewed frantically. She swallowed and continued. "And now it's drooling from the smell of food. I think you inherited more feral traits than I've ever seen before."

He found her eyes as though she were analyzing him.

"I'm curious if there are more traits we aren't aware of."

He cut another bite of meat and chewed.

"Does it bother you when I compare you to a feral?" She asked, looking a bit apologetic.

He looked over at her and shook his head. "Should it?"

"It's a derogatory term. People get offended if you compare them to a wild animal. Even if we, more or less, descended from them, people get angry if you say so."

"I've heard that. I've seen people kill another over it. I've been called many things. Words don't hurt. Fists and weapons do." He took another bite of the meat. "This is so good," he thought. "I need to tell her that. Plus, I feel like I was going to tell her something earlier and I can't think of what it was."

Shari chewed and swallowed a bite of the meat. "That's one of the more mature things I've heard you say. I mean, when you speak, you sound intelligent even when you don't understand what's being said to you. But this is very...rational."

"I see. I think," he said and took a drink from his tankard. "*Thank...you...?*"

Shari smiled. "You're welcome. That's kind of what I mean. You took words that I could have put in a better way, but you took out of it as me complimenting you. And I was. Even if you have a natural scowl, those golden brown eyes show intelligence, perceptiveness, cunning and even kindness."

He looked down at his plate. "Maybe," he said and cut off another bite of the meat.

"Now you're just being humble," she said and giggled. She looked down at her plate and used her knife and fork to cut a bite off the slice of meat. "I guess I did say I'd talk about myself, but here I am talking about you again." She looked up at him. "I guess I can't help it. I find you more fascinating than myself. You've, from what I can gather, have been out and seen the world. You've experienced so many things. And I've mostly stayed in this area and the surrounding cities. It makes me a bit envious."

He swallowed. "No," he said and looked at his plate. "You have family, friends and the ability to heal other's wounds both outside and within. I just went around to places and caused those wounds. It's nothing to envy."

She looked down at her own plate and took a drink. "I suppose you have a point."

They ate in silence for a while. Shari cut off more slices from the roast and refilled their plates.

"Vilkas," Shari said, breaking the silence. "My name is Shari. Shari Aviganis."

He looked up at her as he chewed and tilted his muzzle to the right, leaning in a bit.

"In about a month, I will turn twenty-two years old. I was born premature due to complications with the pregnancy," she said and began to choke up. Her eyes began to water. She set down her fork and brought her right hand up to her mouth and wiped her eyes with the back of her left hand. "My...mother," she began, her words slightly muffled by her hand. "She...died...giving birth to me."

He set down his fork as he listened. He looked down at his plate as she composed herself. He looked back up at her as she began to speak again. She looked down at her plate and placed her hands in her lap.

"For the longest time, I blamed myself for her death," she said and cleared her throat. "That's why, for as long as I can remember, I wanted to become a doctor. I wanted to save lives." She looked up at him. "I wanted to show her that I was sorry and that her life wasn't wasted on mine."

He dipped his muzzle in acknowledgment. She gave a smile even though he could see the pain she was trying to hide.

"Anyway, I think that's why I'm smaller than my sister and father. He said that Valeska inherited his intelligence, fur coloring and eyes with mother's beauty while I inherited some of his looks and mother's intelligence, fur coloring and eyes. Father opened the pub when he moved here with mother and Valeska. He was a chef and brewmaster. Mother was a merchant director with knowledge of pricing trends and logistics."

She looked back down at her plate.

"Mother's health became worse during Valeska's pregnancy. Valeska almost died. They moved to Namal Lu because they heard they had the most knowledgeable doctors. After some treatments, mother felt healthy enough to conceive me. Mother wanted to live here in Dalry. She said she was taken in by the family atmosphere and wanted her children to grow up in that kind of environment. So dad moved them from Namal Lu to here after they discovered she was pregnant with me."

She looked up at him and smiled. "So I was born and raised here. I moved to Namal Lu when I was ten and lived with one of the doctors' families for about eight years. I learned everything I could and practiced with the doctors as much as I could."

She chuckled. "Daddy was a mess when I left and a bigger mess when I came home all grown up even though I wrote to him every week."

For a few minutes, they ate in silence.

"When I returned, Daddy moved me into this house. He'd saved up to build it and furnish it. He even gave me a large bag of coins to do whatever I wanted with the examination room you are staying in." She glanced away from him and her tone became serious. "I was treating a patient. We," she said and sighed. "Clicked...almost immediately," she said and sighed again. She looked up at Vilkas. "I fell in love with a patient. Something I'm not supposed to do. But we met up several times and..." Shari looked down at her plate and seemed to be fidgeting while fiddling with her hands. "We did what all lovers did."

Shari was quiet for a while. He looked at her patiently.

"We even planned on him moving in and starting a family. We made plans to build a house behind this one and turn this house into a clinic."

Shari chuckled nervously as a tear fell from her right eye. She seemed to bite the inside of her lip during this stretch of silence.

"I was so absorbed with my work and delusions of the future that I didn't notice the change." More tears fell from her eyes. "He became distant," she said and finally looked up at Vilkas. "I," she said and sighed as another tear fell from her eye. "My sister told me some things she'd seen so I," she said and looked back down at her plate. "I asked him about it after he came home late one night."

Shari was silent for a long time. She had begun to shake and was fiddling with her fingers more violently. Her mouth was working as if she were gnawing through her lips. "That's," she finally said, her lips and jaw quivering. "That's when he hit me."

He felt several feelings begin to ignite within him. He had long since dropped his fork next to his plate and was clutching the top of the table. The desire to protect Shari became even stronger. Anger filled his muscles and he clenched his jaw. His heart pounded in his chest. It felt like his blood was lava flowing throughout. He could feel his throat vibrate with a deep, low growl. The wood of the table began to creak under the pressure of his grip.

Shari looked up at him. She smiled weakly. "It's alright, Vilkas. Settle down and put your fangs away."

He couldn't stop the intensity in his expression and eyes. But he did manage to ease his grip on the table and relaxed his muzzle and jaw.

She smiled a bit more genuine and nodded slightly several times. She glanced down and chuckled. She looked up at him and said, "I hit him back, don't worry." She wiped her eyes and took a drink from her cup. "I hit him so hard he went flying into the front door. His father and my father were waiting outside. I guess my father went to him. He told him that his son was drinking a bit and waving loose lips in the pub."

He felt himself calm down a bit more.

"When my father saw my puffy and bloody lip, he almost killed the guy," Shari said and chuckled. "They escorted him and his things out to the end of the village and told him he was no longer welcome here. I guess his new woman followed him out. Sometimes when I go to Lyneda, I'll see one of them. They don't speak to me and walk the other way when they see me. I was in the clinic there about a month after they left when she came in for a pregnancy checkup. She was several months along, I heard." Shari shook her head and smiled more genuinely. "Despite all that, after that day, I became closer to Seppo."

He still felt the anger at what he'd heard, but what she just said was intriguing. He was also getting a better sense of just how protective everyone is to each other.

"Mostly because he wouldn't stop coming by to see if I was okay and to apologize for his son's behavior for about a month after. He and my father became good friends as well. Seppo crafted nearly all of my equipment at material cost." She winked. "I made sure to include a little extra despite his objections."

They had finished off the roast and ate a few of the rolls. Afterwards, they started washing the dishes when Shari continued her narrative.

"I'm not sure if I needed to tell you all of that, but I feel if you're going to be living here for a bit, and living in Dalry for years to come, that it would give you a good idea of just how close this village is - like a family - and we would do anything for each other." She looked at him with a stern look. "And I saw your reaction. I want to make it clear that I can protect myself if I need to. You may be scary and you'd kill me almost instantly..."

He winced at the thought. He wasn't sure if she noticed. He felt the need to dispel any thoughts she may have had on that matter, but he stayed quiet.

"But if you force my hand, I'll make sure to leave more than just another scar."

He nodded. "Understood." He continued washing the dishes and she dried them.

"I'm not sure what else to say without it sounding like we're about to start dating," she said and placed a plate in the cupboard. "I can't really tell you about my work other than my schedule. I suppose I could be vague and tell you the kinds of procedures I've done or illnesses I've cured. But it doesn't sound interesting."

It was quiet for a moment as he chose his words.

"I'll listen," he said as he finished cleaning the utensils. "I want to talk to you more. I want to understand you better. I feel that the more I listen to you talk, the better I'm getting at controlling my feelings. I want to understand myself better. Even so, I don't see us as becoming anything more than friends." A sharp pain filled his chest. "And I don't see myself as being able to be close enough to someone to call them a 'lover'. I anger quickly. I look down at almost everyone. I'm all muscle and no brains. I'm covered in scars. My nose was broken and isn't straight. My ear rings and doesn't stand upright. Some of my tail is missing. And I have this lame arm. I'm not '*normal*' like you. I don't see how anyone would be able to feel 'love' or 'lust' towards me. I think I'm okay knowing that, but I do wonder how I'll feel knowing the truth if I do change and begin to feel and act '*normal*'."

"Sweetie," she said and placed her right hand on his left forearm.

He stopped washing the roast pan and looked over at her.

"Don't think like that. I'm sure there's someone out there that can look past all that. She may find your height, your muscles, your scars, your nose, your ear, your tail and arm charming. She'll accept all that because you're able to protect her. You're a great listener and you reply thoughtfully. You strive to learn more about everything around you because it's all kind of new. I think you'll work out a way to suppress your anger and find a way to use it constructively instead of destructively. I think one day you'll find someone calling you the kindest person they know. You may still be a bit of a recluse, but I think that's what you will find comfortable as compared to someone who likes to be surrounded by people. I hope to see you and your lover living happily together. And I hope that I'll be the one to deliver your first child." Shari giggled. "I'm actually pretty excited at that thought," she said and giggled again as she squeezed his arm.

He was a bit lost in thought as she spoke to him. He felt a range of emotions as he looked into the wash basin. He knew his feelings towards her, but he was also aware that those feelings probably weren't feelings she shared for him. It wouldn't work out between them. They are from different backgrounds and upbringings. He knew he only felt that way towards her because she was the first woman he'd bothered to get to know. He felt sad that his first love was his doctor and teacher. But he was also happy that it was her. He was happy he decided to live and to stay here. Perhaps everything she just told him would come true.

He looked over at Shari. She wore an expression he wasn't sure she'd made before. Her ears were slightly turned out. Her eyes were narrowed, but not calculating or irritated. Her nostrils were open slightly further. Her muzzle was pointed slightly down. She wore a grin and was biting her bottom lip on the right side. Not only that, but it felt like she was kneading his forearm.

He narrowed his eyes and drooped his muzzle while looking intently into her eyes. He couldn't deny that the look was making every part of him tingle. However, it didn't appear as though she was looking at a friend right now. He had to know why she was doing this.

"Shari," he said and craned his neck to try and look deeper in her eyes for some hidden meaning. "Why are you looking at me like that?" He asked sincerely.

Her grin slowly faded and she stopped kneading his arm. She twitched and her eyes widened. Her lip slowly flicked back out to normal and she raised her muzzle up to match the angle of his. He could feel her shallow exhales passing over his crooked muzzle end.

"I...was...just," she began.

All at once, her face seemed to collapse in on itself, her nostrils squeezed in, she gripped his arm and he closed his eyes at an incoming projectile.

"TOO!!"

He felt something wet and slimy on his nose and on top of his muzzle. He slowly opened his eyes to see Shari's mortified face.

"I...am...so sorry."

He saw her nose was wet and she had spit dangling from her bottom lip. He looked along his muzzle and saw a yellowish-green worm along the end half of his muzzle that was hanging down over his left nostril. It felt like something was swinging off of his nose as he breathed.

"Don't move," she said and rushed off. She came back with a clean cloth and covered his muzzle with it. She pinched the cloth together and lifted it off of his muzzle. She folded the cloth and wiped his muzzle and nose.

"Here," she said and held up another cloth.

He took the cloth and wiped his face and muzzle. He folded the cloth in on itself and reached out and wiped the spit that clung to her chin.

"Thank you," he said.

"No...sweetie...you should go and wash your face. That wasn't normal snot," she said and pulled the cloth from his hand. "Come on," she said as she grabbed his hand and tugged.

She led him to the washroom. She dropped the cloth into the dirty towel bin and grabbed two clean ones from the shelf on the right side of the wash basin.

"I've felt it coming on all day, but it seems like I can't deny it any longer," she said as she wet the cloths. "I've caught your fever."

He looked at her as she rubbed soap into one cloth and handed it over to him.

"I'm sorry," he said and began to wipe his face.

"Sweetie, you don't have to apologize. You did nothing wrong, but," she said and began to wipe her own face. "I do appreciate the sentiment."

"Even so, you can't afford to be ill before returning to work."

"You're so thoughtful," she said and rinsed out her cloth. "I appreciate that. Don't ever stop being that way."

She wiped off her face with the wet cloth and rang it out. She wiped her face again and hung up the damp cloth. He took his soapy cloth and did the same. She looked at him after hanging up the cloth he used. She wore a pained expression.

"I'm so sorry. That was really gross," she said as she narrowed her eyes. She ended it by sticking out her tongue and shivering.

"It's okay," he said. He stepped in towards her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, giving a slight squeeze before stepping back. "I'm going to finish washing the dishes," he said and smiled as he walked past her.

Shari growled behind him. "You silver-tongued wolf!" She cried and growled again. "No! I think you've graduated to 'gold-tongued wolf'. *You* are insufferable!"

"I'm sorry," he called back and started to wipe the roast pan.

"No," she said as she walked into the dining area. "I feel sorry for the woman whose heart you steal." She walked over to the dry storage and pulled out a jar. "That woman won't have a day where she doesn't fall in love with you all over again."

Shari pulled a kettle out of one of the cupboards and poured some water in it. She placed it on the still warm stove. She pulled out a strange metal device from the utensil drawer and placed it on the table along with the jar. She moved behind him and grabbed her clean cup from dinner and sat at the table behind him. She set the cup down with a bit of force.

"Hmph," she grunted.

"She's acting strange," he thought and rinsed off the pan.

He dried the pan and checked to see if there was anything else to wash. It seemed everything was washed so he drained the basin and hung up the washcloth. He turned to look at Shari.

She was bent over the table with her forearms crossed in front of her with her muzzle atop of them. She had a faint smile and her eyes were closed. She opened her right eye a sliver and smiled wider before closing it.

"You know, when I see you like this, I can't envision a sword in your hand," she said softly. "I hope I get to see even more goodness from you before you leave me."

He felt something strange. It felt like something left him. Not like the airy feeling that shame did. But as if he did lose something. "Yeah," he said. "Smile when you feel

happy and sometimes, even when you aren't," he remembered. "Me too," he said and smiled weakly, but it still felt like there was pain in his heart.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. The pain in his heart intensified.

"She's so cute...so pretty," he thought.

"Would you like some tea?" She asked.

"Not sure if I've had that," he replied. The feeling in his heart eased up a little.

"Grab a cup and have a seat," she said and reached out to tap the table in front of him.

She returned her arm under her muzzle and closed her eyes again.

"Are you going to be able to work?" He asked to break the silence.

"I'll be fine. Usually if I get sick it lasts a couple of days and a few days for it to fully pass. I already took some herbs that will strengthen my resistance. It doesn't feel like it'll be as bad as yours."

"That's good," he said and nodded.

"Could you please grab the kettle from the stove," she said and opened the herb jar.

"Yeah," he said as he picked up the smell from the jar.

It smelled like the weeds from a dry, untilled field.

"Could you also grab the honey from the pantry, please?" She asked and placed the walnut-shaped end of the utensil into the jar.

He grabbed both items and then the kettle. He watched her place the utensil contraption into her cup. She poured the warm water into the cup. He watched as the water slowly turned brown because of the dirty, muddy particles escaping from the small holes in the walls of the walnut-shaped part.

"Oh," she said and pointed at the lower part of the cooler. "I think I should have a lemon in the bottom of the cooler next to the fruits. It's the smallish, yellow one."

He looked over and nodded in acknowledgment.

"Please and thank you."

"Ye-... you're welcome."

There was a lemon in the cooler. She had him grab a knife and another strange contraption from the cupboard. It was shaped like a round plate but it had a large cone in the middle. The sides of it were about as tall as the cone. There was a dent in the lip of one side.

"Could you please cut the lemon in half. Then smash the cut half into that cone until the juice stops flowing. Then do the other half."

"Ye-... okay," he said and followed her instructions.

The pungent sweet and sour smell hit his nose. Shari tapped the contraption against her cup. She started to stand.

He held out his hand. "Let me do that."

She looked at him and then his hand. She slowly sat back down. "Squeeze the handle and the end opens. Drop it in the trash bin," she said and mumbled, "Gold-tongued wolf."

She handed over the contraption with her first two fingers close to the round end and the handle towards him. He took it over to the trash bin and squeezed the handle to allow the ball of herbal mush out. He handed it back to her and she scooped up more of the tea.

"Thank you," she said and dropped the tea strainer into his cup.

"You're welcome and thank you."

She smiled. "You're welcome."

She poured the warm water into his cup.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome. And I appreciate you saying it so much but it's not always necessary. But if that is what feels comfortable for you, keep saying it."

"I don't understand."

She poured some of the lemon juice into her cup. "There's nice...and then there's too nice. Sometimes being too nice can be off-putting for some. Your excessive positive responses can be viewed as a negative." She opened the honey jar and dripped some into her mug. "Shoot. I forgot to grab a spoon to stir it," she said and looked defeated.

He stood and went to the utensil drawer.

"Sweetie," she said as if she were irritated.

He closed the drawer and looked at her.

"I feel spoiled," she said and brought her left elbow onto the table and placed her cheek into her hand. "Gold-hearted wolf," she muttered and held out her right hand.

He tapped the excess water from the tea strainer after handing over the spoon. He emptied the strainer into the trash and placed it in the wash basin. He sat at the table and mimicked her with the lemon juice and the honey. She stirred her mug and handed over the spoon. He stirred his cup and placed the spoon on the table.

He sipped the strange water. It was strange to smell and a bit bitter tasting. The honey and lemon sweetened the grassy flavor of the tea. It wasn't the worst thing he's drank.

"I tried dating after that," she said as she twisted her cup between her palms. "I just...never felt completely comfortable around them...like I was expecting them to leave me at some point." She looked down at her cup and took a drink. She began twisting the cup in her palms again. "I didn't invite them over here. We'd meet at their place or meet somewhere. I let them get closer, but I found myself crying after...that. It was like it was painful. I couldn't enjoy it. I was frustrated."

He listened intently even as he felt various emotions as she spoke. He tried to smile but it felt too strange.

"One of them understood being as it was a few months after the fact, so we parted as friends. Another was irritated and called it off because he was leaving the village to join the Namal Lu army anyway. The last one I told that I didn't feel ready for a

serious relationship and wanted to focus on myself and my work. He was a jerk after that. I suppose it was a good thing he wasn't living in Dalry."

She looked up at him and gave a weak smile. She took a sip from her cup. He took a drink as well.

"Look at you listening so politely as I tell you about my sex life," she said and chuckled half-heartedly. "Your doctor and new friend is a complete mess, Vilkas," she said and looked down into her cup. "I am...so sorry. I'm sitting over here a proverbial warning bell for all women while giving your new feelings and emotions a mixed signal."

He glanced down at his cup and thought for a moment. "Is it not okay for friends to speak to and listen to each other and support them regardless of what is said?"

He glanced back up at her with genuine intrigue. Her face looked pained and her eyes began to water. It seemed as if she were shaking. He furrowed his brow and tipped his head to the left. "Shari...are you alright?" He asked with concern.

Tears fell from her eyes as she stood and walked around the table. She threw her arms around his shoulders and buried her head in the back of his neck.

"You are such a sweetheart," she said softly and sniffled. "You're right. You're being a friend and listening and supporting your friend. Thank you."

He felt her tears dampen his fur. He felt even more confused.

"You're welcome," he said and sat still.

He felt that was the correct way to handle this situation. Despite that...

"I don't understand," he thought.