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

Chapter 22. "It Hurts"

Shari finally pulled free of the embrace. He looked up to see her warm smile. It felt like he was being stabbed over and over in the heart, but he grit his teeth and smiled back. Her fingers slithered around his head and came to rest at the tip of his mandible. She slowly leaned in as she closed her eyes and pressed her nose to his. She withdrew to within an inch of his muzzle. Her eyes darted as if she were looking in each of his eyes. Her lips quivered to a slight smile. He could see her blinking several times. Her left eyebrow bounced ever so slightly. Her pupils were wider than normal. She pulled back a few more inches with a straight face. She stared into his eyes as he stared back. She flashed a smile of pure delight and pulled her first fingers to the end of his jaw - her nails flicking his skin.

He continued smiling at her. He held fast for this long, but he could no longer contain his body from trembling. He trembled out of love. He trembled from the pain. He trembled out of fear. He lowered his eyes, then looked quickly over at the far wall.

"What was that about?" She asked and giggled. "I have something...oh."

Shari left the room, but the image of her pink brasserie showing through her tear-stained blouse stayed with him. He looked over when she returned momentarily wearing a slightly looser-fitting light blue, long-sleeved blouse. The sleeves ended in, roughly, two inch cuffs and the crimped neckline dipped just to the edge of her cleavage. She was covering the end of her muzzle with her hands, but he could tell she was smiling.

"That was a bit embarrassing," she bashfully said, then giggled as she looked away.

The trembling within him subsided as he smiled and looked away as well. They made eye contact again. She quickly looked away and giggled again. She looked back and revealed her smile. She made her way over to the stool and sat. She looked at him,

then away several times. She crossed her right leg over and placed her hands around her knee. She over-exaggerated a sigh both visibly and audibly.

“Good news is that you’re alive and well.” She glanced down at her hands. “That’s also the bad news.” She looked back and said, “I still have to work.” Again she looked down to her hands. “While I’m gone, Nir will be injecting your medicine. Despite being nervous, he said he’d be more than happy to. He’ll stop by at night to give you something to help you sleep. Sometime today, Ularn’s wife will be stopping by with a pillow that should make it more comfortable for you to sleep. You’ll be sitting up for at least a week while your ribs heal. I want you to slowly breathe deep in your chest for ten breaths every few hours during that time to make sure your lung doesn’t collapse again.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Tangi...mentioned I had broken ribs, a cracked chest bone and one of my ribs ruptured my lung.”

She looked up, with a bit of shock. “Ruptured,” she murmured and looked back at her hands. “When the roof struck your sternum, the force caused your lung to collapse. It was the same one that was punctured by the bolt that went in your chest. You didn’t know, but it would’ve been easier to repair if you had left it in.” She quickly glanced from him to her hands. “Your ribs weren’t broken, per se. They were displaced from the sternum - both from the force of the roof and from the resuscitation. The weight of the roof with your lung collapsing caused you to pass out from lack of air. If I wasn’t close to town...you would’ve...”

“And my leg?” He asked, wanting to avoid that kind of talk.

She glanced up at him for a moment and then over to his leg. “That was pretty bad. It was a clean break to your tibia in that there weren’t any bone chips. But it was displaced and the break was at a sharp angle. There’s a small metal plate screwed to the bone on either side to hold it. Being how large you are, it was safer that way. The weight you put on it would mostly likely break it again if you step wrong or something were to hit the side of your leg. The cast was put on to protect your leg as it heals and to remind you not to step on it.”

After a moment, she looked at him. “You are stuck in that bed for at least a week. Seppo, Nir, or myself will assist you to the washroom. You are forbidden from bathing yourself. Either us or Alida will wash you by hand to make sure you and your wounds stay clean. She volunteered to change your bedding every other day. She will also bring you books to keep you busy. They will do their best to be in the room with you so that you aren’t alone while I’m gone.”

She leaned in slightly and became very serious. "If you go anywhere, you go with the roller crutch. I can't stress enough that you cannot put any weight on your foot or leg and you are not to leave the bed without one of us here. No lifting. No activity outside of moving from the bed to the washroom and back. You need to rest. You need to heal. If you do not listen to me this time, you will cause permanent damage. Even if it's not, it will be damage that *I will refuse to repair.*"

She leaned back and brought her clasped hands by her chest. "I'm both asking and telling you to listen to me. On behalf of everyone and myself...Vilkas...as your friend...please listen to me. Please rest and heal. Seeing you with blood coming from your mouth and wounds, seeing you in this bed, seeing you under my knife, seeing you wrapped in bandages...this is not how I..." A tear leapt from her eye and fell down her cheek. "I will do my best to help you. But, it hurts to see you like this. It hurts to see our friend we've come to love like this. If you were to die, I want to remember you without any of this. I want to remember your smiling, happy face. Please do this, not just for me...for us."

He wasn't sure when the words stopped registering in his brain. He stared at her ears as they moved closer, further apart, turned out or dipped to her head. He stared at her eyes as they blinked, darted around or slowly moved. He stared at her nose when it would wrinkle with certain words. He stared at her lips with the wide range of motion she put them through. He wanted to remember everything about this face as if he were to forget her when she left the room.

Shari slightly tilted her head. "Were you listening?" Her eyes narrowed. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry," he said and looked at the wall ahead of him. "Please rest and heal and I will love you," he thought, piecing together the words he remembered hearing. "Rest and heal," he said, then looked over at her with a slight smile. "The 'Meathead Stay In Bed Order'. Got it," he said and gave a slight nod. "And if I don't," he said and glanced down at her hands, his lip quivering within the smile. "You'll never see me again." Though it pained him to say, he still looked up in her eyes with that slight smile.

Shari sighed, closing her eyes and dipping her muzzle as she dropped her hands and uncrossed her legs. "You don't have to go that far," she muttered as she stood. "But..." She opened her eyes and looked at him with her own slight smile. "I'm glad you're *finally* taking me seriously."

He watched her move around the cot. She reached under the other cot and brought her hand up with a length of wood. She moved to the foot of it and lifted. He'd never seen a cot that could fold in half like that. The legs even folded down when another block of wood was pulled free. She knelt down and opened one of the doors under the counter. She pulled out a block that looked similar, but larger than the one he'd used for chopping the broccoli. She placed it on the counter and closed the door as she stood.

"Do you need to relieve yourself?" She asked as she turned to him.

He grinned. "It's not going to be like before is it?"

She rolled her eyes as she scoffed at his words. "No, meathead. You may be stuck in your underwear again, but I'm not holding a knife to your back and you're not helpless." She glanced up at the ceiling and held her right palm up. "*Hopeless* pervert, but not helpless," she said and looked at him with a smile.

"I don't think so, but I should try. It has been three days."

Shari wore a devilish grin as her eyebrow raised. "It hasn't been three days, but I'm sure you'd like to skip the part where I shove things in your penis and make you wear a diaper."

He cringed. "Yeah, let's skip that part."

"Good answer," she said and chuckled. "Let's get you up then. When you're finished, come out in the dining area. You have gifts waiting for you."

She brought around the mobile crutch and helped him stand. It was painful and he felt several joints crack and pop. He was finally with his good foot on the floor while she guided his knee into the support. He felt silly, but it was an order not to put pressure on his foot or near his ribs. It was convenient how the knee support would turn with a bit of effort.

He looked to the dining area as he pushed the wheeled contraption out into the hallway. Piles of stuff were placed against the wall from the stove to the door. He smiled and shook his head as he went into the washroom. After a slightly painful pee, he washed his hands. His muzzle itched. He scratched it and realized the stitches were gone. A ridge of scar tissue and missing fur replaced them.

"She wasn't joking when she said it wouldn't heal the same," he thought and left the washroom.

He made his way into the dining area. He was breathing harder than normal.

Shari looked at him from the other end of the table with concern. "Do your breathing exercise for a bit. That'll help. I'll show you some things while you do."

He slowly breathed in, then slowly breathed out as she brought something over to the end of the table and set it down.

"This is from your other mother Alida," she said as she held up a nice shirt. "A set of nice clothes for special nights and another set for more casual occasions."

The nice shirt was a bluish gray that looked almost purple. The trousers with them were black with a pleat down the legs. The casual shirt was a lemon yellow with white trousers.

"She also made some undergarments for you. She said she'll get you a new pair of boots." Her eyes scrunched up. "I felt bad when I had to tell her I cut them off to check for broken bones. She just got them for you, too." She folded and placed the shirt back on the pile. "I think those boots helped keep your leg from being worse than it was. Be sure to thank her again next time she comes by."

He sighed between breaths as he looked at the table. "She even taught me how to properly tie them. Song and all."

Shari brightened up. "Oooh she did the 'kitty' song for you?" She gushed as she held the clothes to her chest. "I love her kitty song. That's so precious," she said with a brightness that could rival the sun.

"Rochus didn't want me to sing it while I tied them."

"That grouch. He's no fun. I would have paid money to hear you sing it."

She placed the clothes on the end of the table. She picked up another object and brought it over to him.

"This," she said as she held up a sword in a strange scabbard. "Is from Ularn. I don't know anything about swords. But, he said the scabbard is cypress wood stained with the soot from the house you saved Socorro from. Kind of a memorial of the homes

you saved and from the house you saved Socorro from. This is the weird part, but I get it," she said and pointed at what was covering part of it. "These are the scales shed from him, his wife and his daughter. He treated it with boiled tree resin to keep it protected from the elements. He put them on there to show his personal appreciation for saving them." She pointed to the end of the hilt where a green crystal was inlaid. "This is, uh, avengerine or something. Seppo said it brings good luck and a tranquil mind. I don't quite understand all that." She grabbed the hilt under the small cross-guard and drew the blade a few inches out. "The blade is thinner and lighter than your other one but is made from carbon steel - whatever that means. I don't know," she said and shoved the sword back in the scabbard. "Ask him. I looked at him like a flower looks at people talking to it."

"Can't say as I understood a word of it."

She placed the sword on the table next to the clothing and reached for a small wooden box. She brought it over and opened it in front of him. Inside were two bracelets made of polished round stones. The top one was a marbled pinkish and purplish black stone. The one on the bottom was layered in shades of brown and white."

"These are from Seppo. He said this one is road-something. I think it's pretty. But he said it promotes love of one's self and heals the heart." She glanced up at him. "I find it very fitting." She smiled warmly and looked back at the box to point at the other. "He said if you find it too emasculating, this one is a tiger eye stone." She glanced back up. "I can at least pronounce that one." She giggled. "It's for focus and mental clarity. If you don't want them, I call dibs," she said and closed the box.

"I've never found a need for trinkets, but they were a gift. Much like Alida's boots, it would be rude if I didn't make use of them. Even more so if I were to hand them off to someone else."

Shari seemed to glare at him. She snapped the box closed. "It *would* be rude to repudiate one's gift," she said and walked away.

She placed the box on the table. She held her hand on top of the box for a moment as she sighed.

"Shari? Are you alright?"

"Yeah. It's nothing."

She seemed to return to her normal self as she pointed out and told him of all the other gifts he'd received. From food and drink to more personal items like a patchwork quilt and towels with a 'V' embroidered on them. There were even bath items like soap and a grooming kit. The dentist even gave him a 'oral hygiene' kit that had a brush, paste and a rinse that smelled like a noble's drink of mint and alcohol. A chair was under a stack of books. The books came from Rochus and the chair from the furniture maker. There was a document drawn up by Ularn that was a promise to build a house for him as soon as the rebuilding was finished. A deed was included with it.

As she went through the remaining items, he felt himself being sucked down to the floor. His eyelids felt heavy. Shari noticed and forced him to go lie down. She helped him back onto the cot and placed the pillow behind his head.

"Get some rest. You will probably feel groggy for a few days," Shari said and placed her hand on his arm. "I'll come by to make sure you're okay. If you need anything and I'm not here, just holler for me. M'kay?"

"Yeah," he said as his eyes closed on their own.

"Sleep well."

He could hear her move from the cot. "Shari."

"Mmm?"

"Thank you. Thank you again for saving me and...for being my friend."

She was quiet for a moment. "You're welcome."

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He woke up some time later. He looked over to see Shari looking at him over her glasses. She was sitting on the stool reading a book. He recognized that book.

"So, 'The Beast of Oliara' awakes."

She placed a bookmark in the book and closed it. She held it against her crossed thigh with her hands.

He sighed and looked down at his thighs. "I thought I saw that in the stack Rochus sent over. He must've finished the book I bought him. I bet Roger suggested it to him."

"Where did *you* get money?" She asked apprehensively.

"Alida gave me some coin to teach me the value of money. I bought her flowers and Rochus a book. I'm sure you found the remaining coin in the pocket of the tunic I wore that day," he said and glanced over at the pile of clothing next to his knapsack next to the cabinet.

"You think I'm a thief?"

He quickly caught a glance her way. She looked displeased. "No. But if you found it, you can have it."

"I'm not taking Alida's money to cover your bill," she said angrily.

"Why is she so mad?" He thought. He began to chew at his lip as the awkward silence festered in the room. "Did I do or say something wrong?" He stole a glance at her. "She still looks pissed off. She was a completely different person before I fell asleep. Did she really want the bracelets? She can have them if it'll bring her smile back."

"So, what else did she teach you?" She asked with a less irritated tone.

"She began by teaching me how to write. It was putting a lot of effort into learning and writing the letters. I mentioned that I was born right-handed. So, she tied a bit of rope around my hand and the pen. I began to write when I had another..." He quickly glanced over at her. She was slowly tilting her head. "It was slower, so I switched back to my left hand. I wrote all the letters several times before she gave me a dictionary to start learning words. I started by looking up words you taught me."

"Trying to see if I was lying to you the entire time?" She asked, returning to the angry tone.

"No. I wanted to learn how they were spelled. That's all."

He narrowed his eyes and clenched his teeth. "What is her problem? Why is she treating me like this?" He held his breath for an extra beat, then let it out slowly. "Stay calm. It's not worth getting angry at her right now."

“She read your letters to me. I still have them in my bag. It helped me to understand your feelings better that night you came to the river.”

“So you understand my feelings now?”

Vilkas felt his hand clench into a fist. “No. As you said, “Women are complicated”. Alida said you were concerned about me. She said that sometimes people show concern through anger because of how much they care about you.”

He caught a glimpse of Shari bringing a hand up to her mouth.

“I can’t refute the words of a wise woman, I suppose,” Shari said. Her voice was low, but she didn’t sound angry.

“She taught me how to do laundry and I learned how they make soap.”

“She told me you were there with her. She told me not to worry and that she was taking care of you so I could go work. She’s such a sweetheart.”

“She is. She showed me how to properly fold the laundry. I also learned how to make a few more meals while I was there. Sweet toast, breakfast eggs, toasted bread, salad, pasta with sausage, sauce and garlic toast, and a few other things.” A quick smile found his lips. He glanced over and saw Shari drop her hand from her mouth. “I was reading signs as we walked through town. I think I scared that squirrel lady selling flowers. I read her sign wrong. I gave her too much money. Then I went in and met Roger. Still can’t believe the luck of him pulling out a book that might be about me and trying to sell it to me.”

“I haven’t talked to Amy in forever.” Her tone reverted to discontent. “I haven’t read much of it. But the description of the character is spot on.”

“I see,” he said, his fist tightening. “Well, Alida taught me basic math like adding and subtracting. I think multiplying and dividing is beyond me, but I’d like to keep learning. She also explained good manners and how chivalry is a part of good manners. She taught me about honesty...”

“Tch,” Shari scoffed, causing him to pause.

He could feel his muzzle wrinkle. “...And respect.”

“Tch,” she scoffed again.

He took a moment to relax. He loosened his fist and continued. “She also taught me about compassion...”

“Tch.”

He couldn’t take it anymore. Her condescending attitude plucked at the string of his last nerve. He slowly breathed in and held it as he looked over at her with narrowed eyes. “Don’t show your fangs,” he thought, biting his lip as he knew the last word he was about to say.

She held her muzzle slightly up to her right, looking down at him with her eyebrow raised.

He let out his breath as he relaxed his whole body. It was forced, but he gave a slight smile. “She also taught me about forgiveness,” he said as he maintained the smile. His eyes lowered. He saw her fingers were arched and slightly quivering as they pressed into the cover of the book. He breathed in and looked back to her eyes. “I’m not sure what I did this time, but I hope that you’ll forgive me and continue being my...” He could neither prevent his eye from twitching, nor his voice from wavering as he said, “Friend.”

She snatched the book from her thigh and quickly stood. She tossed the book on the counter of the hutch. He stopped following her with his eyes as she passed the foot of the cot. She walked over and grabbed the tray and set it up over his lap. She walked over and grabbed something off the credenza. She stepped over and flung a bound stack of paper on the tray, then slammed two objects next to it.

“I’m going to make dinner,” she stated as she crossed her arms over her chest. She was looking down at the floor with her legs together. “That’s a book the children are learning from. That’s a pencil and eraser. Write with the pencil. The eraser is used to erase mistakes.”

She stood there for a moment. She reached up and rubbed her ear, then turned and left the room.

“I don’t know what is troubling her, but I can’t let it affect my feelings towards her. Maybe if I distract myself with the book I’ll feel better,” he thought as he looked at the items on the tray.

He reached over and placed the pencil and eraser on the left side of the booklet, then pulled his right hand onto the tray. He tested out the pencil first. It was an oblong object of two pieces of wood held together with, what smelled like, resin glue. The writing part looked like charcoal, but wasn't. As she said, when he wrote on the paper and then rubbed the eraser over it, the mark nearly disappeared. He wasn't sure what the eraser was made of, but it smelled faintly like the sole of a boot.

The packet of paper held a few subjects with an instructional handwriting portion at the beginning. The handwriting section was basically what Alida had him do, but with arrows and numbers highlighting the direction and sequence a letter was written. A vocabulary section allowed you to write the word several times and had the definition under it. The math section had basic formulas to solve. The back section was a history portion where you read the history of an event and answered a few questions about it.

He was about halfway through with the handwriting portion when the smell of food filled the air. His stomach began to stir and his mouth began to water. He continued to swallow mouthfuls of saliva until he was nearly finished with the handwriting portion. His accuracy of writing each letter improved several fold from when he was at Alida's.

Shari walked into the room holding a plate, utensils and a cup. She still wasn't looking at him. She held the plate near the tray until Vilkas moved the material aside. She dropped the plate with a fork and spoon, then set the cup down and left the room.

A drop of saliva fell onto the plate as he looked at the food. He brought his hand up and wiped a string of saliva from both of his jowls. He collapsed back into the futon of the cot and the pillow with a heavy sigh. He reached over and wiped the back of his hand on the side of the cot and looked at the food.

There was a pile of chicken that had been cut into bite-sized pieces, mashed potatoes with butter and green flakes mixed in, as well as a mound of mixed, raw vegetables that were also cut into small chunks. The beverage was similar to the berry drink he had the first time Seppo brought food to him.

There was a knock on the door of the house.

"Amy? What...take them back. I don't have the time or the energy for whoever told you to bring those over for me. I'll pay you double if you tell me who sent them so I can properly reject them."

"Uh...um, no. I-it's not like that. Um...anyway, I'm sorry to bother you, Shari. I was hoping it was still okay to bring these over. That 'hero' guy...er...Vilkas had asked me to

deliver these on the day that he saved Socorro. With everything that's happened, I kinda got busy and forgot. I was closing up the stall for the day when I found the note for the delivery. Again, I'm so sorry it's late."

"Ah...er, no it's fine. Thank you."

"You know, I thought he was a scary dude when he stopped by with Alida, but he was really nice to me and I kinda felt awful for acting how I did. I mean...I get it now. He was using what little money he had to show thanks to Val and your father for the food they deliver as well as you for your care."

"Yeah. He's, uh, thoughtful...like that...I guess."

Amy seemed to whisper something. Vilkas was too engrossed with the food to hear it. The vegetables were crispy and tossed with melted butter and salt. The chicken was seasoned and cooked a bit like a rotisserie with the seasoning and the crisp of the skin. The mashed potatoes had butter, garlic, some form of cream and herbs. It was all very delicious.

"Amy," Shari said and sighed. "He's, like, ten years older than you."

That made him stop eating.

"He's going to be laid up for at least a month and I'm...he...I don't mean to break your heart, but think about it a bit more. *Really* think about it. If you still think and feel that way, I won't stop you."

"I-if you re-really...yeah, maybe you're right. Thanks, Shari. Again, sorry for interrupting...dinner. Bye, Shari."

"Take care, Amy," she said and closed the door.

"What was *that* about?" Vilkas thought and returned to his meal.

He finished eating and placed the utensils on the plate. He put the dishes off to the side of the tray and continued working in the book. Shari was quiet for some time. He managed to finish the handwriting portion and began working on some of the vocabulary words.

Vilkas almost startled when Shari walked into the room and took his dishes away. "I still can't get over how stealthy she is to my ears," he thought, doing his best not to look her way and focused on his work.

He could hear her clicking and clacking dishes as she seemed to be washing them and putting them away. Soon after, he could hear her draw water into the washtub and light the fire to begin warming it. He could barely hear her moving some things around. It sounded like something was set in the washtub. It was quiet again for some time after she stopped the flow of water.

He turned to the next page and kept working on the words. It was a bit frustrating, but rewarding at the same time. He really just wanted to keep his mind off of...

Shari walked into the room. She was wearing a towel that was tightly secured around her chest and another that looked like a skirt. "Bath time," she said quietly. She still wasn't looking at him. She was standing beside the cot holding her left elbow with her right hand.

He put the book and writing materials to the side. Shari lifted the tray and set it off to the side. She took the book, pencil and eraser and set them on the counter. She brought over the mobile crutch and held out her hands. He tentatively reached out and allowed her to help him up and onto the crutch. He followed her into the washroom.

Once in the washroom, he saw a small stool with a slatted seat in the washtub. She turned to him and motioned with her fingers.

"Drop 'em."

He gently bit his lip. He looked at her. She was looking impatient with her arms folded across her chest. He lowered his eyes and pulled the drawstring of his underwear. They fell across his sheath as he reached around and undid the button over his tail. He gently pushed them down as she stepped over and grabbed the handle of the mobile crutch.

"Don't step down," she said and pulled on the handle.

He did his best to hold up the weight of the cast. She set the crutch aside and knelt in front of him, then grabbed the underwear. She pulled down while he carefully straightened out his foot. He placed his hand on the counter and hopped from the right leg hole, then lifted his left foot so she could pull the garment free of his foot. She

tossed them aside and stood. She pulled off the bandages from around his chest while rolling them up, then tossed them into the trash bin. He looked down and saw his chest was shaved of fur with a fresh set of stitches in the 'Y' shape. It didn't register with him the first time that his chest fur was shorter. He decided to pass it off as another insignificant detail he passed over.

"I think the easiest way to do this will be for you to sit on the edge, turn and place your good foot in, then lift yourself onto the stool. Keep your bad leg on the edge of the tub," she said. Her voice was kindly instructional. A vast difference of her tone from earlier. "I'll ask Seppo to look at installing a handle here and in the exam room to make this easier," she went on, her voice quiet and more thinking out loud.

It took some finesse he wasn't accustomed to, but he finally sat on the stool. She tied a towel around his left knee and draped the rest over the cast. He sat still and stared at the wall above the hand washing basin. Shari used a small bucket to douse him with water. She lifted his arms and carefully splashed water from the bucket onto the dry parts. She placed a towel down on the floor, grabbed a cloth and the soap. It wasn't her usual floral soap. It smelled sweet - like the sugar and cinnamon he remembered from the sweet toast. It looked like oats were stuck inside the bar.

"This smells good," she whispered. "Be sure to thank them. And this is going to hurt. Bear with it. If you don't get washed, sores will develop from your sweat and you don't want the incision to get infected," she said, her voice calm and polite.

She rubbed the soapy cloth into his head, neck and face fur, then rinsed it off. She lathered her hands and gently ran her hands over his chest. It did hurt. He grit his teeth and furrowed his brow. He tried to do his breathing exercise to calm himself down. She rinsed his chest and moved to his arms and sides. She cleaned his tail, then lathered his thighs and right leg. It was uncomfortable. He tried to recall the vocabulary words as she lathered his groin. She finally rinsed it off and stepped in the tub. He felt embarrassed when he looked down and saw an inch or two of his penis was exposed. She lathered and rinsed his back. She finally had him stand. It was a new experience having someone lather his butt, let alone the inside of the crack to his anus.

She used a towel to dry him as he sat on the stool. She gently dabbed at his chest when she came to that part. After his torso and legs were dry, she had him stand so she could dry his groin and backside. She did the whole thing over with a fresh towel.

Once he was dry, she helped him into a clean pair of underwear and followed him into his...the examination room. He sat on the edge of the bed. As expected, she covered his chest wound with salve and wrapped it. She went to the hutch, grabbed a

length of cloth and tied it tightly around his left bicep. She prepared a needle and stepped back over. She inspected the bare spot in the crook of his elbow.

“Not bad, Nir,” she murmured, then administered the shot.

He pulled himself back against the upright futon. She placed the pillow behind his head and helped his foot into the block to prop it up. He could feel himself getting drowsy. She pulled a light blanket up to his chin, then turned to leave.

“Shari,” he quietly said, feeling his eyelids droop. She stopped by the door, but didn’t turn to look at him. “I’m sorry. I can’t...I can’t help how I feel. But...it hurts...when you talk...to me...treat me this way. I forgive...if you...fo-give me. Bud...mo imbodendy...thang-oo...fo wo-gan so hawd. Fo eb-li-ling.”

His mind was swimming in the river. His fur felt like bubbles on his skin. His tongue was hanging out of his mouth. His last image was of Shari silently leaving the room and closing the door. His chest ached as his brow furrowed slightly.

“Ib hurds,” he whispered as his head hung in sleep.

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