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

Chapter 23. “Nightmare”

I woke up outside. The sky is very strange. Shades of orange and purple swirl behind clouds of various sizes. These clouds seem to be depicting faces. Screaming faces. I shrug it off and move on.

A feral fox stops beside me. A cute little vixen with a face that seems to permanently smile. She shook her head and scampered ahead of me.

The trees seem strange. With the wind brushing the leaves, an eerie howl fills the air. The bark has a noticeable pattern as well. Demonic faces. They seem to have over-exaggerated smiles - their ‘eyes’ seem to follow me. The weeds seem no different. Their branches appear as arms reaching for the sky. Their blooms resemble sobbing faces beseeching some higher power.

I walk forward and discover the headless corpse of a fox. I look over and see a few more scattered corpses. All of the heads are missing. I happen to catch a glimpse of a head rolling into view. The vixen! Her eyes were missing...that face ever smiling.

My eyes turn up to see a floating skull. The pure white bone stands out against the thin layer of pink that fills the cracks - the mixture of fat and blood. The eye sockets are hollow. The hollow tunnel at the end of its muzzle devoid of soft tissue. It’s jaw slams shut as another head tumbles near my foot and the body it came from falls lifeless by the skull creature’s feet.

I recognize these feet. Those white toes. My eyes follow up the leg of caramel and chocolate fur to the white knees. Up further to the white belly to the white bib. The flesh surrounding the neck looks torn and it sways with the creature’s own oscillations.

“Sh-Sh-Shari? W-what’s wr-wrong?” I stutter, fear sinking into my chest as my heart races.

The creature opened its mouth. A ghastly hiss escaped. "I hate you."

The words reverberated in my ears as I take a step back. "No! This can't be happening," I plead as I step back again.

She begins to giggle. The world around us begins to warp as it turns pitch black, then fades in as if a painter took their brush and swirled it around their palette. She begins to cackle as if her mind was lost forever.

"I HATE YOU! DIE MURDERER! DIE SCUM! DIE DIE DIIIIIIIIIE!!!" She shrieked and began to laugh maniacally.

The heads at my feet seem to look up at me with their eyeless sockets. I take another step back with trembling legs. My whole body quakes as I watch her nether lips spread, releasing a flood of spiders, centipedes, locusts and other insects. My eyes narrow on the insects as they march towards me. They bear the faces of the villagers I've met in Dalry - their eyes gouged out and blood dripping from their extended tongues.

I scream. My lungs on fire, I scream louder!

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"AAAAAAAAAAAH!! AAH! AAH! GET THEM OFF ME!" Vilkas wailed as he slapped at his arms. Something is caught around his neck. "GET IT OFF GET IT OFF GET OFF ME!!!" He grabbed the constricting item and threw it as hard as he could against the wall. "AH! HAH! HAAAAAH!" He continued to wail as he frantically slapped his hands against his body - heart pounding, veins engorged, eyes wide, ears so far back it hurt, spit dripping and spraying as he called out with hastening breath. The room swirled and rippled like waves across the ocean.

"DARIJUS!"

"GET THEM OFF GET THEM OFF MAKE IT STOP MAKE THEM STOP MAKE...!!!" He locked eyes on Shari as she entered the room. Flesh and fur peeled from her body as she moved. He could hear her skull continue to spew hatred and insults in his head. "NO NO NO NO STAY AWAY FROM ME STAY AWAY!!!"

He continued screaming and clawing at his fur as he pushed with his feet to move away from the demon, but his feet kept sliding against the sheet. Sweat pooled against his skin and began to soak the cot.

“CLOSE YOUR EYES! IT’S NOT REAL!” She yelled at him as she fumbled with a needle.

“LIES! LIAR! DEMON! STAY AWAY!”

The needle grew to the size of a rolled up area rug in her skeletal hands. She continued to cackle...then vanished.

“HAH! GET OFF! GET OFF!” He yelled, turning his attention to the cot swarming with insects.

A sword plunged into his neck.

“RRRAAAHHH!” He wailed and slapped at his neck.

“DARIJUS! YOU NEED TO CALM DOWN! IT’S NOT REAL!”

His arms soon felt like wet noodles. The room suddenly went dark. His heart began to slow. His body became limp. He lost the energy to scream. He felt his head become enveloped in warm, fluffy ropes and fall against soft clouds.

“It’s okay now, Darijus,” Shari soothingly said, her voice sparkling like chimes softly sounding in a gentle breeze. “It’s not real, sweetie. It’s just a hallucination from the drugs. Just a side-effect. You need to calm down and breeeathe.”

He felt his body turn to gelatin as he breathed out the taste of sulfur and charred remains. The skull demon’s shriek became quieter and quieter in his head. His nose filled with the delicate scent of a flowering field. His body felt like it was smiling and filled with love. This process repeated over and over until the evil was gone and only happiness and love remained.

“SHARI!”

A door slammed open in the distance and footsteps resounded around the house.

Vilkas startled as the door slamming sounded like a whip cracking. He began to tremble and clenched the sheet. The footsteps all sounded like an army of feral horse riders surrounding him. But the feeling of his mother’s hand stroking his head and back calmed him from panicking again.

“Sha-hah-hri.”

The voice made Vilkas imagine the smell of freshly baked bread.

“Rakas! Ystävä! What happened?”

This voice made Vilkas feel safe as if it were coming from the general of a friendly army. He felt himself calm down and the trembling subsided.

“Nir. Seppo. Everyone. It’s okay now. It was just a bad reaction to the sleep drug,”

“Vitun paska! I think the whole village is awake, rakas,” Seppo said with concern.

“He was fine yesterday,” Nir said, his own concern showing.

“I’m sorry. But, he’s had recurring nightmares of his past. I should have been more conscious of what I was giving him. Negative feelings and emotions exacerbate the effects of the hallucinogen.” Shari sighed, the clouds and the fluff seemed to be rocking Vilkas like a boat in water. “I think it’s my fault,” Shari said, her voice wavering. “I don’t know what got into me, but I wasn’t exactly nice to him before I injected the serum. I’m so sorry.”

“Well, we can talk about it later, if you’re so inclined, rakas. I’ll let everyone know everything’s fine now. You two get some rest.”

“Thank you, Seppo. We’ll do that.”

Footfalls of retreat softly echoed, then a door closed. The invasion was over.

Vilkas could hear Shari’s heart. The sound reminded him of a feral fawn springing around its mother in play. Soft coos escaped his mouth as he felt his mother’s loving hand stroke his head and back.

“I’m so sorry, Darijus. I was so horrible to you,” she whispered, her voice soft and sweet like the sugary cloud on a stick that a festival vendor would sell. “You sat there so calm and collected. You kept your fangs hidden. Even when you looked like you were about to attack, you smiled. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Vilkas felt his thoughts form and dissipate with the calm river's flow within his head. "Ah...hah," came from his mouth as he willed himself to speak.

He felt the clouds and the fluff leave his head. Soft, jellied beans pressed into his cheeks and under the back of his jaw. He pried his eyes open to reveal Shari. The real Shari. A white aura radiated from her and a yellow light illuminated the area behind her.

"You're higher than the birds, aren't you?" Her lips pressed together and stretched to an uneasy smile, her eyes conveying sadness. "I do hope you can forgive me."

His eyes closed and opened about as fast as a snail moves. His mouth was open and he could feel his tongue teetering over the top of his bottom fangs.

"Sit back, sweetie. I need to get the light and look you over to make sure you didn't scratch yourself too bad. I'll wipe you down as well. I'll give you a bath in the morning and you can rest in my bed until Alida comes by with the fresh sheets." Her head tilted slightly to the left. "Can you lean back for me, sweetie?"

"Uh," he replied.

Shari helped him lean back against the futon. She smiled at him as she brushed her thumbs across his cheeks.

"Luh."

"Hmm?" She hummed and smiled a bit wider.

"Luh...ah."

"I don't know what you're trying to say, sweetie. Think you can tell me in the morning?"

"Heh."

"Okay then. I'll be right back."

His eyes followed her from the room. He stared at the doorway until she returned. She placed the lantern on the counter. The combined light radiating from her and the lantern illuminated the whole room. She appeared as an angel in his eyes.

She dabbed, then checked the cloth along his arms. She dabbed and checked over his neck.

“No blood. That’s good,” she said and dabbed his face.

She wiped his head. She lifted and wiped his arms. She leaned him forward and wiped his back. She left and returned again. She held up a strange object at the end of the cot.

“This is what you thought was choking you. This is a pillow designed to wrap around your neck. Because I know you don’t get enough air through your nose, this flap was designed to hold your muzzle up so you can breathe more comfortably. Seppo and I designed it and Ularn’s wife made it for you.” Shari moved beside the cot. “Can I put it back on for you?”

Vilkas tried to nod, but his head fell to his chest. Shari lifted his head and pressed his tongue back in, then closed his jaw. She pulled the strange pillow over his muzzle, then over his head. As he leaned back and rested his muzzle on the sturdy flap, it did feel more comfortable and he could breathe fine even if he opened his mouth.

“It looks silly, but I bet you feel a lot more comfortable.”

She stared at him as he stared back. He watched her as she moved over and flipped the foot of the other cot over and set the legs. She moved the other cot close to his, then left the room with the lantern. She returned a moment later and tossed her pillow and blanket upon the other cot. She untangled his feet from his blanket and positioned it over his body.

“HMMMMM,” he hummed as a wave of pleasure flooded his body.

Shari chuckled. “Wha-hut was that about?”

“Mmm,” he hummed and tried to move his hand.

“Something,” she said and moved over to his left.

She pulled the blanket back. He tapped his leg as she scanned his body.

“I don’t see,” she muttered and seemed to follow his finger with her eyes. “Really?” She asked with a slight chuckle. She gently placed her hand on his groin. He hummed as her fingers carefully examined the area. “Sweetie,” she said and pulled her

hand back as she looked up at him. "I can't help you with that."

"Mmm," he groaned.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. But that might be another side effect of the drug." She leaned in closer to within an inch of his nose. "Or is it because you really do..." she quietly said and looked down. She looked back up at him and smiled. She kissed the top of his nose. "Don't. Please don't. Don't because...just don't okay," she whispered. She closed her eyes and pressed her nose to his. "Don't love me like I love you," she whispered.

A rush of joy washed over him. Just as the wave crested, it splashed down and took his body with it. His eyelids dropped and his muzzle fell into the soft ring of the pillow.

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Vilkas peeled open his eyelids. He quickly closed them and groaned as his head began to feel like it was splitting open. He continued to groan as he brought his hand up and rubbed his head.

"Mmm," he heard to his right.

He pulled open his right eye and looked over. As his vision cleared, he could see Shari lying on the other cot underneath a blanket. He couldn't see it very well, but it looked like she was holding his right hand. Shari moved and her eyes opened. She groaned and brought her left hand up to rub her face. She looked up at him with her eyes slit. He felt his right shoulder move, confirming what he thought he saw.

"Morning," she murmured. "You feeling okay?"

He closed his eyes and rubbed his head again with a groan. "My head feels like it's splitting open."

"I'll get your meds. That should help."

She uncovered her body from the blanket and shimmied off the side. She went to the hutch, came to his side and bound his left arm, went back to the hutch to prepare the needle, then came back for the injection. She placed the needle back on the counter top and untied the cloth from his arm. She helped him out of the sleeping pillow and positioned the regular pillow behind his back.

“You should feel some relief in a little bit. It might not go away completely.”

“Shari...what happened last night?”

Shari visibly shook and looked wide-eyed at him.

“I remember a vivid nightmare and waking up with bugs crawling all over me.” He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his finger and thumb into the bridge of his muzzle. “I don’t remember anything after that.”

“Oh good,” she breathed out, sounding relieved.

He pulled his hand away and looked at her through squinted eyes. She was looking down at the cot.

“You woke up the whole village with your screaming. I gave you a shot to calm you down and you went to sleep.” She looked up at him. “It was a bad reaction to the sleep serum. That’s all.”

“Is she not mad at me anymore?” He thought as he rubbed his head again.

“Darijus,” she said quietly.

He lowered his arm and looked at her. She was looking down again.

“I’m sorry for how I acted yesterday. I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s...”

She quickly looked up at him. “It was completely uncalled for and I hope that you’ll forgive me.” She blinked several times and looked down again.

He smiled. “Of course.”

She looked up and seemed to brighten up. “Thank you.”

“Compared to what I’ve done and put you through, you have a ways to go to catch up with me.”

“Not funny. And let’s not make this a competition or a list of IOUs. Let’s just continue to forgive each other from here out, okay?”

“Agreed.”

They continued to smile at each other for a moment.

“I’ll get breakfast ready.”

Shari pulled the blanket down past his feet and moved over to the counter. She seemed to think for a moment. She picked up the pencil and appeared to write something. She moved the cot and folded it. She leaned over and picked up the tray. She positioned it over his lap and brought his supplies over. She moved over by his things and picked up a book. She placed the book next to him, then gave him a warm smile as she left the room.

Vilkas looked at the cover of the booklet. Her handwriting was very neat compared to his.

“D. I. S. S. E. I better look it up,” he thought and grabbed the dictionary she had set down. He flipped page after page until he got close to the section he was looking for. “There.”

dissemble [dih-sem-buhl] - give a false or misleading appearance to others; conceal the truth or real nature of something

“I don’t understand. Why would she write this down?” He squeezed his eyes shut and held his hand to his forehead. “I can’t think about it right now. My head still hurts.”

He closed the dictionary and leaned back against the futon. He held his eyes closed and covered them with his hand. He relaxed his body and mind as he listened to Shari move around the kitchen.

“You okay over there?” Shari quietly asked.

“Yeah. I was just resting my eyes.”

“Breakfast is served.”

He moved his hand and opened his eyes. He moved the workbook aside. Shari placed down a plate of eggs, sausage links, cubed potatoes and lightly buttered, toasted bread.

"I'll be back with a drink and some spread."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, sweetie."

Shari left and returned with a glass of milk. She placed a strawberry spread and a knife on the tray. She turned and seemed to think as she stared at the other cot. She appeared to shrug. She placed the cot into its down position and left the room. She rummaged in the closet and came back with another tray. She lowered its legs and placed it on the other cot. She left and returned with her own plate, drink and utensils while carrying a piece of toast in her mouth. She placed the food down and sat on the cot. She took a bite of the toast and chewed as she sat on the cot. She took another bite of the toast and set it on her plate before moving the tray over her lap.

Vilkas looked at his food. "I'm thankful for the food."

"You're wel-..."

"I'm thankful for Shari being my..."

"Whoa whoa whoa!"

He looked over at her as she struggled to swallow. "Jerk," she choked out and took a drink from her cup. "Gah," she uttered and breathed, then looked at him. "If I'd known you were going to do that, I wouldn't have started stuffing my face," she said, sounding and looking angrily at him.

"It just came out, I guess. Sorry."

She moved her tray to the side and walked over to his cot. "It's fine, meathead," she said with a chuckle. "I haven't done this in forever." She took his right hand in both of hers. "Continue."

He smiled and looked back at his plate. "I'm thankful for this food. I'm thankful for Shari continuing to be my friend. I hope that I will continue to heal both inside and out. I hope that Shari remains healthy throughout the day. I pray that we get through the day with smiles on our faces and lo-...happiness in our hearts."

"I love that woman," Shari said. He looked over at her. "No disrespect to my mother, but if I get reincarnated, I would like to have her as my mother. Or better yet, reincarnated with my mother and Alida is her best friend."

"She's such a good person."

"Good?" Shari asked loudly. "That woman is nothing short of amazing." She lost her exuberance. "That's one family that didn't deserve to lose their loved one."

"I agree," he said and looked down at their hands.

He looked up at her. Shari continued to hold his hand, seemingly lost in thought.

"Anyway, that was sweet. We should do that again. Maybe, let me cover the one for dinner?"

"Sure thing."

"And...you can say, "Love in our hearts". It takes the generalized form in that case. It's nothing direct."

He nodded. "I guess you're right."

"Best to remember that," she smugly stated with a grin and let go of his hand.

"Yeah."

Vilkas used the spread on his toast. Shari patiently waited and took it from him to dress her own. She placed it on the counter and resumed her meal.

"That reminds me," she suddenly said.

He looked over at her with a bit of a puzzled look. She continued to look at her plate. She looked up at him.

"Have...have you howled before?"

He looked at her with a more puzzled look.

"That night...when...stuff happened." She looked down and rolled a sausage link back and forth for a second. "I heard you howl."

He perked up as he remembered that moment.

“It was,” she said and looked at him. “It was beautiful.” She looked back down and continued rolling the link. “But, I could also feel the sadness.” Her tone turned serious. “Even as they were holding me down and shoved that shit in me...” She sighed and looked up at him. “When I heard that, it tore me up. Meaning I could feel your sadness. Your pain. In that moment, I wanted to hug you so tight. Do you think...would it be possible to hear one that doesn’t sound so sad?”

He looked down at his plate, deep in thought. He looked back at her and smiled. “I don’t think I’ll be doing it anytime soon.”

She laughed. “No shit! If it wasn’t a waste of food I’d throw this sausage at you. Smart ass.”

“Graduated from ‘meathead’. I’ll take it.”

Shari picked up a sausage link and threw it at him.

“*Nom*,” came from his mouth as he plucked the link from the air into his mouth.

“Seriously!? How feral *are* you?” She asked lightheartedly in disbelief.

He moved the link into his upper lip. “Thank you for the food,” he said and gleefully chewed.

Shari laughed, causing him to nearly choke on the food with his own laughter.

After breakfast, Shari prepared the bath. She reminded him that he was sweating profusely before she calmed him down. His headache was subsiding, but he could still feel it lingering. It didn’t help matters as she cleaned his genitals while he went through vocabulary words and math problems in his head.

After the bath, Shari had him lie in her bed. She explained that she was out of sheets for the cot and that Alida would be over after the laundry was finished. Several pillows had to be shoved behind him, but he was finally sitting upright.

Shari took some clothes and dressed in the other room. She came back in and brushed her hair in front of the vanity. She grabbed a book and laid down on the bed in the opposite direction. She propped herself up with her right elbow and ran her fingers

through her hair. She had it collected in the back of her head with a ribbon. She had her loose bangs collected and pinned to the side of her fur with silver clips. She was wearing a light brown, pullover blouse that seemed to blend perfectly with her caramel fur. She wore a darker brown skirt that passed her knees that seemed to blend well with her chocolate fur.

Vilkas couldn't help himself from staring. Being able to see her entire face, he could only think of one word, "Beautiful."

He startled and looked down. It was almost as if she read his mind when she stopped playing with her hair and looked over at him.

A smile spread her lips as she quietly chuckled. "No lewd thoughts in my bed, pervert."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "I'm not allowed to say it," he murmured.

She giggled. "Better not. I'll throw this book at you."

He passed his tongue through his teeth and over the front curve of his lips. "She's reading *that* book," he thought. He opened his eyes and looked over at the book, then up at her.

She slowly turned her head towards him with her lips askew and her eyebrow up.

He took a breath. "My earliest memory is from when..."

"Damn you," she cried, her face filled with anger. "Why do you always do this to me?" She marked and closed the book. She pushed herself up and slid off the bed. She stared at him with a softer expression. "You love catching me off guard when you tell me important things, don't you?"

"N-no. I mean..."

"Shut up, smart ass. I'll make us some tea. Hold that thought."

Shari left the room. He looked down at the tray with his workbook and utensils.

"Am I really ready to tell her everything?"

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