



BY YOSHINO ORIGUCHI
ILLUSTRATED BY Z-ton

MONSTER GIRL DOCTOR

9

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Illy flew at Plum, talons out.
She tore at the vampire's clothes until Plum's
voluptuous bosoms were exposed and quivering.
Plum let out an ear-piercing scream.

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MONSTER GIRL DOCTOR



VOLUME

9

STORY BY
Yoshino Origuchi

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Z-ton



Seven Seas Entertainment

MONSTER MUSUME NO OISHASAN VOLUME 9

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Prologue: Unseasonable Heat Wave

SOME TIME HAD PASSED since Glenn Litbeit had returned from his trip back home. While the calendar claimed it was the middle of spring, Glenn was as listless as if it were summer. This was because of the unseasonable heat wave that just wouldn't seem to let up.

"It's so hot!"

"Oh, it's hot."

"Whoa, it's hot!"

Glenn chuckled. Apparently, the fairies weren't fond of the heat, either. It wasn't just the high temperatures, but also the extraordinary humidity. For a cold region like Lindworm, these were unusual circumstances. The level of discomfort reminded him of summers in his hometown.

"Doctor, no lazing about! Didn't you just resolve to work hard?"

"Oh, yeah...you're right," Glenn glanced down at the letter on his desk.

A few important things had happened since he'd reopened Litbeit Clinic. First of all, there had been major reforms to the laws of the human realm, thanks to Souen. People with Demonitis, as well as monsters living in the shadows, were now officially recognized throughout the human realm and were to be treated the same as humans. The legislation would take more time, but Souen was pressing on, leading the movement.

This also meant that he and Saki could finally be married.

The letter on Glenn's desk was the marriage announcement. The fact that Souen hadn't bothered to invite Glenn to the wedding and had only sent a brusque letter was what Glenn would have expected from his brother. But the letter had also included a significant gift.

"Your debt is paid, and you got a new lab coat. Now you truly are independent from the central hospital."

“Yes. Arahnia did a good job with the coat.”

Sapphee rotated her upper body in a snake-like fashion. Instead of the nurse’s uniform she normally wore, she had on a slightly more sophisticated number. She’d kept the same light-shielding undershirt, but the silhouette had changed, as had the medical care worker insignia.

“This is the Litbeit Clinic emblem, after all.”

“Yes, it is. I really *do* have my own clinic now, don’t I?”

Sapphee smiled. “Your dream has come true, Doctor.”



Glenn's clothing had changed, too. He'd turned in his knee-length shorts for long slacks. His shirt was more professional, and it was covered with a white lab coat. An armband on his upper sleeve sported the new emblem as well.

"It's only because my brother pushed his money on me."

"And *that's* because your diagnosis and clinical records were officially recognized," she reminded him.

"Yeah, I know, but...I wish he would have at least told me ahead of time," Glenn complained.

"That's Souen's way."

Souen had purchased the records of Glenn's examinations, and the diagnosis of Sioux's Demonitis, from Glenn's mentor, Cthulhy. The details of the transaction weren't clear, but rumor had it that Souen had paid a hefty price. Apparently, a dissertation written by Cthulhy based on those records had been included. Glenn's father had read through everything, and the result had been a systemic change in the human realm, allowing Souen to wed Saki at last. For this, he would have paid any price.

Glenn had already known most of this when he returned from the east, but then Souen had unexpectedly sent him a check worth three thousand gold coins as a token of gratitude.

"It's just so much to send without any warning."

"Perhaps you should think of it as a congratulatory gift." Sapphee suggested.

"It's way too much for even that!"

And what had Glenn done with the huge sum? He'd paid off all his debts, starting with what he owed from the poisoned water incident and followed by what he still owed to the city council, the central hospital, and the farms. With plenty still left over, he and Sapphee had commissioned new uniforms. He'd also registered the clinic's new emblem with the council.

"We can no longer rely on Dr. Cthulhy. Of course, we'll still have to share information, but we need to successfully run this clinic on our own."

"More importantly, there's no one left to get in the way of our marriage!"

Sapphee giggled, flicking her tail in high spirits.

Glenn was now completely independent. The debt had been taken care of, leaving nothing to encumber his relationship with Sapphee. Even Cthulhy, who'd warned the two of them not to let their feelings progress when the clinic first opened, had softened.

Independent operations *did* mean an increase in accounting workload, but Sapphee had gladly taken on the added responsibility while simultaneously planning her wedding.

"You're all good, Sapphee?"

"Leave the ceremony to me. I need you to concentrate on being a doctor—especially with everyone suffering from heat exhaustion. There's a lot to do."

"I'll try my best," Glenn said, feeling ashamed that he was already turning into the type of husband who left all the errands to his wife.

The heat wave was likely the reason that Sapphee was even more active than usual. This sort of weather agreed with poikilothermic monsters like lamia. But for centaurs and hairy monsters who tended to sweat, it could be fatal. At the clinic, they'd rushed to prepare a vat of cold lemon water for anyone who stopped by for a break from the heat.

"I think we're going to be busy," Glenn said.

"Yes, but we can get through it together...for our wedding!" Sapphee had marriage on the mind.

Glenn chuckled, then returned to his paperwork.

"We also have a different sort of task to tackle," Sapphee reminded him. "From the council."

"Ah, that." Glenn nodded.

The Litbeit Clinic was already independent of the central hospital. Until now, Cthulhy had sent work to Glenn to make sure he got the experience he needed, although Sapphee had teased him that the requests were usually unreasonable. Now it was likely that difficult requests would come straight to the clinic, like this one from the council.

“Have you heard about the ambassador to the human realm?” she asked him.

“Yeah, I heard from Sioux. So...they’re going to choose someone from Lindworm to liaise with the human realm?”

“That’s right. And the council wants you to perform a physical exam on each of the candidates. They want you to check that the girls can handle such a long trip.”

Glenn nodded.

With all the changes in the human realm, communication between humans and monsters would now grow. The plan was to send young women from Lindworm—the connection between the two realms—east on a goodwill tour. Humans’ opinions of monsters wouldn’t change overnight, but the idea was that representatives could help sway public opinion.

“Sioux has already been selected as one of the two ambassadors. We will examine the candidates for the other.”

Sioux Litbeit had been born in the human realm. Because of that, and the strong bias against Demonitis patients, the council had deemed her a good fit to spread awareness of monsters. The other ambassador would be someone Sioux was close to, and would accompany her east.

“So, the candidates have already been decided?”

“Yes. Lulala has the support of the water canals, Illy the support of transport, and Memé the support of the workshop.”

Glenn knew all of them well. They were close in age to Sioux.

“Oh, and Plum is also a candidate, at the insistence of Lord Murdrac.” Sapphee chuckled.

Plum was a vampire. She also seemed to be after Glenn’s blood. But given Lord Murdrac’s influence on the council, no one could say no to him.

“Fine. Let’s get on with the examinations, then.”

The human realm was quite far away. Glenn should know, having just returned from his childhood home. He was well aware of the difficulties of such a long trip. They couldn’t risk something happening to an ambassador

representing the monster realm. On top of that, Glenn wanted whoever was chosen to actually enjoy their journey.

“Yes, Doctor! You need to do your job perfectly, so we can have a perfect wedding!”

“Y-you really are excited.”

Sapphee was even more fervent than usual, again likely due to the heat.

“Now then. On to today’s exams—”

“D-Doctor! Doctooor!”

Glenn was interrupted by someone rushing into the waiting room, ignoring the sign on the door. It was Memé, the cyclops craftsman...and one of the young women he and Sapphee had just been discussing.

“I-it’s terrible!”

“Memé? What is it?”

“They’re fighting in the square!” Memé’s large single eye darted around wildly. “Th-they’re going to hurt each other! Help them!”

“Who’s fighting?” Glenn asked.

The fairies, recognizing the urgency of the situation, packed his doctor’s bag with necessities. Glenn slung it over his shoulder and headed for the door.

“I-it’s Illy and Plum!”

“Er...”

“Just hurry!” Memé was beside herself. “They’re both screaming! It’s a mess!”

Glenn and Sapphee looked at each other and nodded.

Spring heat was in the air.

Case 01: Sunburned Mermaid

“WHAT? The human realm? Who’s going?”

“You are, Illy.”

Illy had come to Scythia Transportation headquarters, as usual, to pick up her deliveries for the day, when Tisalia, the young heir to the company, had sprung the news on her.

“There will be an ambassador from Lindworm to build goodwill with the human realm. Illy, you’re one of the candidates. And you know you have the biggest advantage, right?”

“What? Ambassador? Why me?” Illy slung the bag filled with letters over her shoulder. Her expression was one of complete confusion. “Lulala is way more popular than me. Why would I go?!”

“Well, when you fly around as much as you do... You know, it’s rare to find someone in town who doesn’t know your cheerful face. Everyone likes to get their mail from you!”

“I’m not doing it to be popular!” Illy protested. “And anyway, the Lady of Scythia Transportation is you!”

“They said they want someone closer in age to Sioux. Aren’t you perfect, Illy?”

“Well in that case, how about Kay or Lorna?” Illy’s crest feathers were twitching.

Judging from her expression, she wasn’t excited by the prospect. “You know better than anyone, My Lady, what the humans did to me. Delivering to them is one thing, but I certainly don’t want to spend time in their realm!”

“That’s exactly why you should!” Tisalia gave her a knowing look. “It’s natural that you don’t feel comfortable around humans, but isn’t that all the more reason why you should learn more about them? Besides, the longer you live here, in a town where monsters and humans coexist, the harder it’s going to be

for you if you hate humans.”

“Er...”

“You already know that not *all* humans are bad.”

“Th—that’s true...” Illy averted her eyes.

For example, Glenn helped Illy out a lot. And yes, Sioux had once been human, and she was the same age as Illy. Since they were both constantly flitting about town, they’d naturally spoken to each other. But their situations were completely different! Illy and other young harpies like her had been captured and forced to lay eggs! She couldn’t just brush her mistrust of humans away.

“The company will be backing you, Illy, so you’d better prepare.”

“Look at the time! I need to get to work!” Illy ran out, gripping her delivery bag.

“Wait, Illy I’m not—”

“I need to make my deliveries, don’t I? We can talk later!” Illy darted into the air before she was even all the way out the door. It was clear that she wasn’t actually interested in talking.

“That girl,” Tisalia said, letting out a deep sigh. But she recalled how she used to run away whenever her mother brought up unpleasant subjects, like trying to rush her into marriage. “Am I turning into my mother?”

Tisalia resolved to not get too pushy about it. She understood why Illy didn’t want to go to the human realm.

“And that’s what happened.”

It was the middle of the day. There weren’t many people in the central square, due to the unseasonable heat wave. Illy was sitting on the edge of the fountain, telling Lulala about her morning conversation.

“Ahh, they asked to go to the human realm, too!” Lulala said.

“I heard that they’ll decide by a vote, which means you’ll win,” Illy insisted.

“There’s no way I’ll be chosen.”

“Hmm. I wonder about that.” Lulala smiled. As Tisalia had said, Illy was quite popular around town. The only person who didn’t seem to realize this was Illy herself. “But I mean, I don’t really want to go to the human realm, either. I heard that people over there *eat* mermaids.”

“Eat them?! How horrifying! I never want to go there!” Illy’s plumage quivered.

As this new information stoked the flames of Illy’s fear, she looked across the fountain to distract herself. There was a young cyclops girl sitting there.

“What about Memé? Maybe she’ll go.”

“What?!” Memé protested. “I’ve just been sitting, minding my own business and doing my best to stay *out* of the conversation!”

“Please, join us!” Illy said, exasperated,

Memé was also close in age to Lulala and Illy. Illy found her single eye to be a bit...disturbing, but she didn’t hate Memé. The young cyclops was timid, and she could be a bit of a pain to deal with, but Illy thought she was sweet.

“A-anyway, I won’t be chosen as an ambassador,” Memé said. “If I were, I’d probably die of nervousness.”

“I’ve heard you’re pretty popular, Memé,” Lulala said from her perch on the edge of the fountain.

“Agggh, I-I don’t want to stand out.”

“Yeah, I know,” Illy said. “You and I? We’re not divas like Lulala. How could they possibly make us ambassadors?”

“All I do is sing!” Lulala chuckled. “But you’re really cute, Illy. Like, if you were to buy accessories from Memé’s shop and wear some of Arahnia’s clothes, you’d be even *more* popular, you know?”

“Accessories? Clothes?” Illy scratched her cheek with one of her wings, unable to even imagine such things. “No, I... Those don’t look good on me.”

“What?”

“Besides, I don’t need to dress up. These feathers are plenty!” Illy spread her wings, her face proud.

When Memé saw this, her black eye twitched. “Y-you’re right. I know you don’t need any of the accessories I make. I...I already knew that.”

“Ugh, I didn’t phrase it like *that*, did I?!” Illy said. “Don’t let it get you down.” She was trying to be nice, but she couldn’t look Memé in the eye. Perhaps she was still afraid of her.

“I honestly can’t tell if you two are friends or not,” Lulala said.

“Help me out here, Lulala,” Illy said.

“Don’t feel bad, Memé!” Lulala began. “It’s almost time for me to sing—”

That’s when the shadow appeared—a figure wrapped in a coat and sunglasses, to ward against the glaring sun.

“Hey.” The figure removed her coat, revealing bat wings underneath. “I heard the whole conversation. Just what in the world are you talking about? It’s infuriating!”

“Who are you?” Illy asked.

The speaker removed her sunglasses, and her sharp eyes narrowed, like she was spoiling for a fight. Illy could feel her hackles rising in response. She’d settled down quite a bit since coming to Lindworm, but she still had something of a temper.

“I’m Plum,” said the young woman, with a toss of her blonde locks. “Plum the vampire.”

“Vampire? Oh, from the graveyard district. I don’t remember saying anything that would offend a vampire.”

“But you did!” Plum glared at Illy. “Saying your feathers are all you need... You think you’re better than the rest of the candidates?! Do you have any idea how hard Lulala and I have to work to look this good?! Or how Memé labors over her accessories?!”

“You’re an ambassador candidate, too?” Illy exclaimed.

“Of course! My daddy came up with the list. He said his daughter would be the perfect bridge with the human realm, and I don’t intend on losing to anyone.”

“You go on then. I’ll drop out,” Illy offered. She didn’t want to go to the human realm in the first place. Nor did she have any interest in Plum’s prideful ramblings.

“Oh, really? You’re scared of losing, then? After you were just saying that you don’t need fashion because you have wings?”

“What? What does that have to do with it?”

“It has everything to do with it!” Plum bared her fangs. “Didn’t you know? The ambassador will be decided by a vote. In other words, the most popular girl—the cutest girl in town—will be chosen.”

“Nah, that’s not true!”

“It *is* true,” Plum fumed. “Everyone votes based on appearance. They want someone pretty! And you...you think your *feathers* make you pretty?”

“Well,” Illy began.

Plum snorted.

Memé had grown frantic. She didn’t know how to ease the tension between these two.

“I mean, if you wanted to drop out, I’d understand.” Plum reached out with one of her wings and pulled Memé close. “Then you’d know that you lost to my charms and Memé’s accessories, yeah?”

“Huh? Wha...what?!” Memé was confused.

“Are you on *her* side?!” Illy cried out, seeing the cyclops’s reaction.

Memé shook her head fervently. “I-I’m not on *any* side! A-and I don’t want to fight!”

“It’s fine. Don’t even worry about that loser harpy. Even though she was just bragging about her wings, she knows she can’t beat me. Awww, poor thing!”

“Whaaat?!” Illy’s crest feathers stood straight up with anger. “I doubt

someone as frivolous as *you* could be elected!"

"What do you care? You said you don't even *want* to go to the human realm!"

"I don't! But I also have no intention of losing to you! You've got a lot of nerve, considering I've never even met you!" There was that time Illy had called the doctor who saved her life, but she ignored that for the time being.

"If you don't want to go, then why don't you just shut yourself away in Lindworm, you scared little chicken!" Plum shot back.

"If you would just listen!"

Illy flew at Plum, talons out. She tore at the vampire's clothes until Plum's voluptuous bosoms were exposed and quivering.

Plum let out an ear-piercing scream. "This was my favorite outfit!"

"Shut up! Apologize for making fun of my feathers!"

"You're the one who brought them up! Where do you get off? Sure, your feathers are a bit pretty, but you clearly don't care about your appearance!" Plum grazed Illy's face with the claw at the end of her own wing, leaving a red streak.

"You idiot!" yelled Illy.

"Eeek!" Plum shrieked.

"Chiiirp!" Illy cried out.

They tumbled into the square, talons and claws grappling and scratching. With each tumble, more of Illy's feathers flew into the air. It made for a beautiful sight, though losing her beloved plumage was torture for Illy. Even so, both girls were keeping their scratches shallow, so the fight wouldn't turn fatal. They tore at each other's clothes, exposing more and more skin. With all the excitement, they didn't even notice the people staring at them.

"Ah, ah, aaaah! Wh-what can we do?" Memé had tears in her eye, and she was shaking.

"Ugh, there's nothing we *can* do," Lulala said, just as distraught.

Plum bit Illy.

“Owww! Watch where you’re biting!” Illy’s scream filled the square.

“Memé, will you go get Dr. Glenn? We need to stop them before they’re seriously injured!”

“O-okay...but what do you mean by ‘stop them?’”

“This!” Lulala plunged her hands into the water then clasped them together, creating an explosive stream of water. There was nothing either of the distracted combatants could do to counter this technique, which had once taken down the leader of a group of slave traders.

“Ergh!”

“Agh!”

The harpy’s and vampire’s screams were soon drowned out by water.

“You both need to cool off!” Lulala said, exasperated.

“Now explain. Why were you fighting?”

“Er...”

“Uh...”

Illy and Plum, soaking wet, puffed out their cheeks as Glenn questioned them at the Litbeit Clinic. The fairies had provided them with towels, but they didn’t attempt to answer as they wiped their bodies down.

“Your claws and fangs are dangerous! You can’t just whip them out!” Glenn tended to their wounds as he spoke. After disinfecting the scratches and bites, he applied ointment and then covered them with gauze.

“I’m sorry!” Illy offered, though she didn’t look like she meant it.

Plum was silent, staring off into the distance, seemingly bored.

“Hey, you apologize, too!” Illy snapped at her.

“But I didn’t do anything!” Plum protested.

“Apologize to the doctor for taking up his time!”

“Fine! I’ll apologize, but what makes *you* think you have the right to tell me

what to do?!"

"That's enough!" Glenn interrupted, worried they were going to go at it again right there in the clinic.

They both shut up, rather than drawing Glenn into their feud.

"Waaah!" Half crying, Memé kept looking back and forth, not sure whose side to take.

"Memé has been worried sick about you," Glenn said. "Reel it in a bit."

Illy and Plum had arrived at the clinic mere minutes after Memé, and well before Glenn had even grasped the situation. It was clear from their attitudes that they wanted nothing to do with each other.

What to do?

He wanted to ask why they'd fought, but neither of them was talking. However, the commotion had occurred right after Glenn was asked to perform the physical exams for the ambassador candidates.

Does that mean it was about the selection?

Plum had her own issues, but given what humans had done to Illy, it would be completely understandable if this was bringing up past trauma. Glenn considered performing the physical exams then and there, since they were already in the clinic, but it didn't seem like the right time.

He sighed. "Well, anyway, all of your wounds are superficial, so I've patched them up for now. If you *must* fight, keep your hands and claws to yourselves."

"Fine."

"Got it, Doctor."

They were surprisingly obedient, but Glenn saw them eyeing each other. Evidently, some people were just incompatible.

What do I do about this?

Spats between young women were beyond Glenn's capabilities.

"I asked the fairies to contact your guardians," Sapphee said, with a satisfied expression. "They'll be here to collect you soon."

“Guardians? Who’re they?” Illy cocked her head, confused. Without parents or other relatives, the closest thing she had to a guardian was—

“Tisalia.”

“The Lady is coming?” Illy was taken aback.

“I also contacted Arahnia. Bothering her in the middle of her busy workday... Surely she’ll be angry about that.”

“Why would you call my mentor?!” Plum protested. “I have a dad!”

“We can’t approach Lord Murdrac,” Sapphee said. “Also, won’t you genuinely listen to what a respected mentor has to say?”

Illy squawked and Plum screeched in protest.

Sapphee paid them no mind, keeping a straight face. “Anyway, you’re forbidden from fighting. I won’t stand for you taking up more of the doctor’s time, especially for something so ridiculous.”

“Ergh...”

“I-I’m sorry!”

Both girls straightened up under Sapphee’s piercing glare, though they still wouldn’t look each other in the eye. Memé still seemed trepidatious.

Could this be an aftereffect?

Glenn let out a deep breath. Just what he needed. One more thing to worry about.

There was a Waterway running beneath the clinic.

This facility was available for aquatic monsters who needed to be examined. In most cases, Glenn offered these patients personal visits, but sometimes they would come to the clinic on their own. For example, when they wanted to talk about something complicated.

“Are those two fighting again?”

“Well...it’s not really fighting, but they won’t even meet each other’s gaze. It’s

hard on Memé, too. Plum is a regular at her shop, so she can't just betray that relationship, but she also feels guilty about not taking Illy's side. The whole thing's a mess."

The bearer of this news was Lulala, visiting the clinic as a patient. She shrugged her shoulders in the water and spread out her hands.

"They shouldn't fight. Nothing good comes of it. I think everyone should just get along and listen to my songs!" Spoken like a true diva.

Glenn chuckled at this. "Yeah."

Lulala was lying on the exam table for aquatic monsters, which was basically a stone cot submerged in the water.

"I can get along with anyone, right, Miss Sapphee?!"

"Huh? Oh, yes."

"Hee hee!"

Sapphee offered a tight smile at Lulala's carefree attitude.

Not long before, when they were in the human realm, Lulala had declared she would marry Glenn. She wasn't even old enough to be married, but Sapphee was still processing the incident. She didn't want Glenn to have an infinite number of wives, but she also felt that Glenn owed Lulala a straight answer before she came of age.

"So, how does she look, Doctor?" Sapphee asked, changing the subject.

"Honestly, I can't recommend that she take a long trip," Glenn answered frankly.

Lulala's brown skin was peeling in places.

"She's quite sunburned, I think because it's been so hot lately, but it's better to avoid a trip to the human realm, since she'd have to travel part of the way on land."

Sapphee was filling out a document with Glenn's findings. It was probably a report for the council.

"Have you been spending more time on land, Lulala?"

“Mmm... The amount of time hasn’t really changed, but the sun is *really* hot,” Lulala complained as she picked at some of the peeling skin on her upper arm.

“Oh, don’t do that!” Glenn looked alarmed.

“What? Really?”

“Of course,” Glenn said. “Humans should always let it peel naturally, but it’s even more important for mermaids. The mucous membrane needs to develop first.”

Since mermaids had adapted to living in the water but could also handle short spurts on land, their bodies were protected by a thin mucous membrane. When mermaids were exposed to strong sunlight, the top layer of skin burned. While there were individual differences in how mermaids responded, the fact that Lulala’s skin had turned brown meant she probably had some tolerance to sunshine. Others burned a painful red. The brown color was a pigment reaction, and it worked to protect the skin. However, even that couldn’t protect the mucous membrane.

“The mucous membrane doesn’t generate fast enough for freshly peeled skin,” Glenn warned. “Also, the lighter skin underneath is susceptible to inflammation. Mermaids need to be treated more carefully than humans.”

“What?! I had no idea! I picked at it a lot!” Lulala rolled over on the cot, showing her back. It was riddled with patches where the top layer of skin had been peeled off, exposing pale skin beneath.

It was common for both humans and monsters to know very little about their own bodies. Providing accurate information was part of the doctor’s job. Now that Glenn was working independently, he would have to take more responsibility over the health of his patients.

“The mucous membrane is thin in some places, due to the peeling. If we don’t treat it, it could lead to a more serious skin disease, even if you don’t go to the human realm.”

“Eeek! I didn’t realize!”

“The unseasonable heat really is causing problems.” Glenn sighed.

Apparently, a number of monsters had collapsed at Aluloona Plantation. The heat was especially troublesome for monsters covered in fur.

“It shouldn’t be a problem if you just stay in the water. The membrane regenerates quickly.”

“I can’t cancel my singing! The council is counting on me!”

“That’s true,” Glenn agreed.

When Lulala sang in the square, it wasn’t just a performance. It also let the entire town know what time it was. No one could take her place. Sure, she was better off than when she used to sing all day long in the Waterways, but it was still a grueling schedule.

“Sapphee, the aquatic monster ointment.”

“Yes, I’ve prepared it.” Sapphee used her tail to pass him a bottle filled with a clear liquid.

“This is medication to help with the formation of your mucous membrane,” Glenn explained. “If you apply it to the places where your skin has peeled, it can mitigate the damage.”

“Thank you, Doctor! You’re right. I really shouldn’t be going to the human realm like this, should I?” Lulala sighed. Her words suggested disappointment, but the sigh was relief that she wouldn’t need to go back. “I’ll let either Illy or Plum be the ambassador. If it’s a contest instead of a fight, do you think it can be decided peacefully?”

“I wonder.” Glenn still didn’t know what to do.

The Litbeit Clinic had already received ballots. The election wouldn’t begin until after Glenn’s examinations were complete, but once a decision was made, it could mean a whole new mess of problems.

“Anyway, let’s apply the medicine. Show me your back, Lulala.”

“Huh? Y-you’re not going to apply it yourself, are you, Doctor?”

“Of course I am. Your back is hard to reach, isn’t it? If you miss spots, that could lead to inflammation.”

“Uhhh, I’m a little embarrassed.” Lulala tugged at the string to loosen her swimsuit and expose her bare back. “But I guess if it’s you, Doctor... You’ll be my husband someday, after all.”

“Uh, uhm, well...” Glenn could only nod noncommittally at her confidence in their future marriage.

“As the first wife, I need to make sure I’m firm in my position,” Sapphee resolved out loud. But neither Glenn nor Lulala noticed.

Glenn stepped into the water and wet his fingers. There was risk of damaging Lulala’s mucous membrane if he touched it before cooling his hands. If he was too rough, the membrane would peel off, risking infection. When he’d palpated her gills in the past, he’d been very careful, but this time the ailment was on her back, and he’d have to touch a much wider area. Glenn scooped out some ointment with his wet fingers and spread it on Lulala’s back.

“Mmm, err, it’s slimy...”

“Well, it’s a mucosa protective agent.” Glenn applied it to the spots where her skin had peeled away. The medication had a high viscosity, so it stuck fast to her back.

When the ointment permeated her gills, Lulala’s body quivered from the strange sensation. “Ahh...mmm-aaa...oooh!”

“Shall I also remove the skin that has already peeled?”

“Huh? But when I did that you said I shouldn’t!”

“Normally, it’s not ideal. But since we have the ointment, I think it would be better to apply the medication to the spots where you’re peeling. That will allow you to regenerate the membrane faster.”

“Oh, really?”

The sunburn on Lulala’s back had progressed, and the burnt skin was peeling in several places.

“I’m going to start now.”

“Yes, please,” Lulala replied in a singsong voice, which was muffled by the cot.

Glenn began peeling away pieces of skin.

“Mmm...” Lulala moaned.

In a way, it was like molting, though there was a bit of pain when the attached skin was torn away. He peeled off a piece about the size of his index finger, exposing the pale skin beneath.

“Mmm, oww!”

He then rubbed ointment into the freshly exposed area. If any part ended up not covered in ointment, it could become inflamed, so Glenn was thorough.

“Yeah, mmm...”

“Lulala, your natural skin is very beautiful,” Sapphee said as she observed.

“Oh, yeah. Um, my mom is from the deep sea, so my skin is naturally light. My father’s from a shallower habitat. I think I tan easily because I take after him.”

“It seems your mother and youngest sibling have stronger deep-sea mermaid blood,” Glenn said. “I think sunburns would immediately inflame their skin, rather than turn it brown.”

“That’s right. That’s why they don’t really leave the Waterways on days when the sun is strong.”

Glenn nodded. The main reason Lulala was able to sing on land and be the breadwinner of the family was genetics.

“I hate my father. I hope he never comes back. But I feel just a little grateful that he gave me a body that can move easily on land.”

“I think you have a high tolerance to the sun because you have a high volume of pigment in your skin. But if you’re not careful, it could cause inflammation. It might even lead to throat or respiratory disease,” Glenn warned. “Please be careful.”

“Okay,” Lulala agreed.

Lulala had had a rough life at home. Her father had run off, and she’d been forced to support her mother and four younger siblings.

“Hey, Dr. Glenn?”

“What is it?”

“I wonder if I can... Can I really become a good wife to you? My mother and father fought ever since I was a small child. I admire married couples that get along, but I don’t really understand them.”

“Lulala...” Glenn was at a loss for words.

Even though she’d been the one to declare that they’d get married, she couldn’t really imagine what a happy marriage looked like.

“They were both mermaids, and yet they couldn’t get along,” Lulala said. “And you and Sapphee are completely different species, yet you’re a great couple. But then there’s me, and I can only live in the water.” It wasn’t like her to talk like this, to be so...timid.

“Yeah,” Sapphee said, switching out the empty ointment bottle with a new one. “An interspecies marriage like that might be very difficult.”

“I thought so,” Lulala said, looking dejected.

“But marriage is even difficult between the same species, as you know,” Sapphee continued. “My mother never spoke about my father. Something happened before I was born, but I don’t know the details.”

“Is that right?” Glenn was surprised.

“Yes. I’ve never told you about it, Doctor.”

It was rare for Sapphee to mention her parents. Glenn had never even heard her talk about her father before, but evidently that was because Sapphee hadn’t known him herself.

“If it’s difficult no matter what,” she said, “then we should go after someone we truly love. Don’t you agree, Lulala?”

“Yeah,” Lulala agreed. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“You can always call on me if you need someone to talk to,” Sapphee said. “I’m Dr. Glenn’s *lawful wife*, after all.”

Lulala chuckled at this. “Hee hee! As long as I have a big sister to consult, it will be all right.”

“Yes.” Sapphee smiled.

She truly thought of Lulala as her little sister. But perhaps she was also showing her potential acceptance of a marriage between Lulala and Glenn... even though it would be quite some time before he gave a formal answer.

Good grief, Glenn thought. If Sapphee accepted it, then he’d actually have to reckon with Lulala’s feelings.

“I’m going to continue with the treatment now, Lulala.”

“Oh, yeah. Ahhh!”

Glenn resumed peeling the frayed skin and applying ointment.

“Eee! I-it hurts a little when you peel it!”

“Sorry. I’ll try to be gentler.”

“Ahh, ahn! Ahnmomm!”

One patch at a time, Glenn gently peeled the burnt skin away, like it was the delicate shell of a boiled egg. Lulala might still be a child, but this tender back of hers carried the weight of her entire family.

“Ah, mm, mmm...”

Glenn’s hands reached the nape of her neck, where the burn was especially harsh. The sun probably shone directly on that spot whenever she sang at the fountain.

“Ooh, eee!” Lulala jerked. “Mmm, ahh...”

“Don’t move, Lulala.”

“Umph...” Lulala said. “When I think about you touching me, Doctor, it tickles even more!”

All of the peeling skin had been removed, except for at the nape of her neck.

“Mmm, ahh, oo, ooh!”

“Just hold still a bit longer.”

“Eeh, ahhh!”

This area was especially sensitive, and Lulala couldn’t help but tremble and

jerk. She held onto the examination table tightly, her tail twitching.

“Ah!” Glenn said.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry. Your skin broke off when I was in the middle of peeling it. I’m going to do it one more time.”

“Ahhh, nooo!”

Glenn resumed, even more gently, peeling the skin at Lulala’s nape. Each time, she let out a strange whimper, clearly finding the sensation unpleasant.

“Oooh, a-aren’t you done yet?”

“Yes, I’m done,” Glenn smiled as he looked down at her neck, the skin a different color than it had been a moment ago. “I’m going to apply the medicine now.”

“Mmm, I forgot about that.”

Glenn applied a generous amount of ointment to the nape of her neck.

“Ahh! I-it’s cold!”

As long as it stayed cool, it was unlikely that Glenn’s hand would damage Lulala’s mucous membrane. Relieved by this, he rubbed the ointment into her skin.

“Mmm, mm! Aaghuh!”

“I’m almost done.”

“Agggh, h-hurry!” Lulala was doing everything she could to stay still, but the bottom half of her body was writhing, splashing water everywhere. If she struck him, Glenn could be seriously hurt.

“Okay, your neck is done.”

“O-okay.”

“Now, last of all...” Glenn glanced over at Sapphee. She nodded, passing him another bottle, filled with white liquid.

“I’m going to apply a waterproof sealant to the places covered in ointment.

This way, the medication won't come off even when you're in the water."

"You can do that?" Lulala asked.

"Of course! It doesn't taint the water flowing through the Waterways, but it does make things a bit cloudy, so I don't use it often. However, you'll need it today to protect your mucous membrane." Glenn began to apply the white, sticky liquid to Lulala's back.

"Mmm! I-it's tingly!"

"That's because you're sensitive where the skin peeled off. Once your mucous membrane reforms, it won't bother you anymore. Just be patient."

"Eee! Aggh, mmm, ahh!" Lulala jerked and writhed. She seemed out of breath, and her gills, which were normally closed on land, started to twitch.

"Mm, mm, mmm!"

"I'm almost done," Glenn said, as he used all five fingers to thoroughly rub the sealant in. He finished at the nape of her neck, touching her as gently as a lover.

"Mm! Aggh, aaahhh!" Lulala couldn't help but cry out.

When he was finally finished with all the treatment, Lulala lay spent on the exam table, completely worn out.



"Oooh, my back is a completely different color than the front. How ugly!"

Now that the treatment was over, Lulala's eyes were filled with tears.

The contrast between the pale skin of her back and the brown skin on the rest of her body really was something.

"You'll tan again. Don't worry."

"Okay," Lulala replied obediently.

If only Illy and Plum had such an attitude, they probably wouldn't fight. Sure, they were both straightforward and honest when talking to Glenn, but evidently, that wasn't how they acted around other women their own age.

"Doctor...lately it's been hot even *in* the water. I'm not sure what to do about it."

"Hot...*inside* the water?" Glenn tilted his head.

Lindworm's Waterways originated in the mountains, where snow melted to form clear, contaminant-free water that maintained its cool temperature even in midsummer. If the water truly was warm, then that meant the heat wave was off the charts.

Glenn didn't know much about weather, but he'd heard that when the temperature of the ocean increased, it meant the weather was abnormal for that year. If a river got hot, wouldn't that make the ocean it fed into hot, too?

That reminds me...wasn't there some sort of connection between mermaids and weather?

Sapphee tapped Glenn on the shoulder, rousing him from his thoughts.

"Doctor."

"Huh? Oh, sorry. What is it?"

"I'm going to report to the council that Lulala can't be ambassador. But...that will mean that the ambassador will either be Illy or Plum, right?" Sapphee said as she stroked the scales at the corner of her eye.

"Wait, I thought Memé was a candidate."

"She was," Sapphee said. "However, she dropped out. Hopefully this won't

spark a new feud between Illy and Plum.”

That sounded just like Memé.

“Those two really don’t get along, do they?” Glenn said.

“Would it be better if I just...push through and go?” Lulala asked, looking worried.

She probably thought that they could avoid conflict if *she* just became the ambassador.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Glenn said. “First of all, as a doctor, I really *can’t* recommend that you make the journey. But even if you did take on the role of ambassador, it wouldn’t address the root of the problem.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Maybe it’s not my place to say, but I think you should be there for both of them as a friend.”

“Leave it to me.” Lulala smiled and winked.

She’d always been a bubbly girl, loved by everyone. But now that she was a popular singer, her smile seemed more infectious somehow. Bright, like the sun.

“The little ones at home are always fighting, too. It’s really annoying.” Lulala giggled. “I might not look it, but I’m the *older* sister.”

Just then, a voice echoed from deep within the Waterways.

“Hey! Sister! Aren’t you done yet?”

“Oh, Syd!” Lulala called back.

The voice belonged to Lulala’s younger brother, who poked his face out of the water, looking so much like Lulala that anyone would have been able to tell they were siblings. More mermaids appeared, popping their heads out in turn.

“Wow, this is the clinic?”

“Hello, Dr. Glenn.”

“H-hi...”

Lulala's younger siblings peered around nosily.

"You're all here!" Glenn greeted them. "What's the occasion?"

The tiniest—Sorau, the baby of the family—had been examined in the past, with her mother. But this was Glenn's first time meeting the others.

"We're here to pick up our sister!"

"She was taking so long, we got worried."

"Sister, we're hungry!"

"Yeah..."

"I see." Glenn smiled.

As a newly independent doctor without a benefactor, Glenn had no idea what sort of requests he would receive and when. He needed to learn more about the residents of the city he'd never met before, or he wouldn't be able to do his job.

"I'm Glenn. Nice to meet all of you. If you ever feel bad, come see me here in the clinic."

"Okay!" they all said in unison.

Lulala, as their caregiver, had probably taught them to respond this way.

"Hey, Doctor..."

"Hmm?"

A young mermaid who looked to be the oldest after Lulala peered up at him with wide eyes. "When you marry our sister, will that make you our older brother?"

"Huh?!"

Before Glenn could respond, Lulala rounded on her sibling. "What on earth are you saying, Remi? You know good and well that there's no way a doctor with such a magnificent clinic would marry me!"

"But Syd says *you're* always saying it."

"Yes...I am."

"When are you going to get married?" the kids all asked.

Glenn was still deciding how to respond when Lulala said, red in the face, "Okay, okay! Time for everyone to go home! Mother will be worried!" Lulala scooped up Sorau.

The other children looked like they still wanted to say something.

"What? Why are you so mad?"

"Don't say things like that! You're going to make the doctor feel bad!" Lulala pulled the children along and hurried away, blushing. "Bye, Doctor! I'll be back again!"

"Be careful! It's still very hot out!" Glenn called after them.

Lulala held up her hand to indicate that she'd heard him.

"Phew!"

"Good job, Doctor. Those kids sure are excitable." Sapphee chuckled.

"Yes, good work, Sapphee."

"I haven't done anything."

"That's not true. You acted very maturely in front of Lulala."

"Er..." Sapphee's face turned red.

If it had been Tisalia or Arahnia, she might have snapped at them as usual, but with Lulala, she acted like a kind adult.

"W-well, Lulala is like a sister to me," she replied. "I want her to get along well with you."

She'd said this to him before. However, now that their relationship had shifted, her words took on a different meaning.

"Yes, I know," he assured her. "I'll work hard for us."

"Oh, now I'm embarrassed. We need to hurry up and hold the ceremony or you'll end up with a mountain of new fiancées! I need to keep them all in check!"

"Well...don't push yourself too hard."

"I won't. Taking care of myself is part of my job! That's why I need you to work hard at *your* job, Doctor."

Perhaps it was the heat, but Sapphee was acting even more assertive than usual.

Glenn, on the other hand...

The water temperature is rising.

Legend had it that mermaids could predict storms, and in some myths, that their singing even *attracted* storms. There were also stories that on this continent, storms moved north from the sea when the water temperature rose.

Mermaids are sensitive to such fluctuations. That's why they can sense storms earlier than other species.

Glenn knew this was nothing but a baseless hypothesis. But he still needed to prepare. This abnormal weather might lead to something worse. He had a bad feeling about all of it.

"Doctor? What's wrong?"

"I was just thinking that it feels like there's a storm brewing."

"Like Plum and Illy's fight?"

"No, no. A real storm. Let's get the broken window shutters fixed."

"What?"

Glenn laughed. Then he decided to prepare his heart, just in case any other storms might be brewing.

Interlude: Parental Woes

FLASBACK TO RIGHT AFTER *Illy and Plum* fought.

“I can’t believe you.”

They were at the Scythia Transportation headquarters. Tisalia was scolding Illy after collecting her from Sapphee.

“You were fighting with the Lady of the Murdrac family! Do you know how much it could hurt our business if we fall out of Lord Murdrac’s graces?”

“Er, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause you trouble, my lady, but—”

“But what?”

“She’s the one who started the fight!” Illy folded her wings, eyes downcast.

Tisalia let out a sigh. “Yes, from what I’ve heard, the young Lady Murdrac *does* cause problems.”

“That’s right! She just said whatever she wanted, like that I should drop out as a candidate if I don’t want to go, which she knows *nothing* about!”

“Hey now, settle down.” Tisalia let out another sigh.

She’d recommended Illy in the first place so that Illy could overcome her difficulties with humans. In that regard, Tisalia was also to blame for the incident.

“Then again, there’s some truth to what she’s saying.”

“Lady?”

“My father and I forced this on you, even though you didn’t want it. I’m sorry, Illy. You should drop out of the ambassador race.”

“No!” Illy cried out, her crest feathers standing up straight. “It’s true that I didn’t really want to go to the human realm...but I’m not going to quit just because someone else tells me to! And I *hate* the way she said it!”

Tisalia nodded understandingly. "You're right. I don't want to fall out of Lord Murdrac's graces, but this is a completely different issue! You can't just let her pick a fight and then walk all over you. Smash her to the ground!"

"I-I never said that!" Illy squeaked, frightened. This former-mercenary attitude was too harsh for her.

"Well, peacefully, then."

"How am I supposed to peacefully smash her into the ground? This is crazy!"

"I just mean...go for it, in your own way. You can talk it out if that works. Like, what is your opponent thinking? Why did she pick a fight with you? It doesn't matter how you resolve it, as long as you can clear up these uncertainties."

"Ohh, so the rumors are true! Scythia really *was* once a wild mercenary tribe!"

"How dare you say such a thing about my noble family!" Tisalia raged. "Former wild mercenaries or not, if you start acting like nobles, then your hearts naturally follow. You might be a contracted employee, but you're still a member of Scythia. You need to think about what's happened."

"I understand, Lady." Illy nodded, trusting the words of Tisalia, who was like a sister to her.

Ever since they'd first met, Tisalia had taken it upon herself to look after Illy. Now she was playing the role of her guardian.

"But...if I *do* fight with Plum again, won't Lord Murdrac get angry?" Illy asked.

"Well, it wouldn't be great, but we have arrangements in place for that. Sapphee made them."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"You don't need to worry about that." Tisalia smiled and winked.

I hope it's going well on your side, Arahnia, Tisalia thought to herself. The arachne was probably in the graveyard district as they spoke.

"Why do I hafta be here, doin' this?"

Arahnia was at the Deadlich Hotel, in Plum's room. The interior was luxuriously appointed, and there were loads of clothes and accessories throughout. Plum was a self-proclaimed fan of Arahnia, and most of the garments had been designed by her mentor.

"Waaah! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to make you come all the way out here!"

"You should be grateful I did. I even convinced your father, ya know? Tellin' him it's just a little playground scuffle so he'd let it go."

"All I do is create problems." Plum clutched Arahnia, tears in her eyes.

Arahnia let her, albeit with an annoyed look on her face. Plum sobbed and carried on, but she was grateful to Arahnia for coming all the way to the hotel.

"I had to be convincing enough for the entire council. Damn, that was nerve-racking. I can't believe Lord Murdrac was even willing to listen to me."

"Because you're my mentor! I always tell Daddy about you! I bet that's why he listened!"

"He really spoils you. But all I know is what Sapphee told me."

Murdrac learning about the fight between Illy and Plum could start a war with Scythia Transportation. Furthermore, Hephthal, the head of transport, was no match for Murdrac. This was why Arahnia had gone all the way to the hotel, so that the issue was kept between those directly involved, without reaching those in power.

It was the first time Arahnia had ever met Lord Murdrac, but apparently, he'd heard about her from Plum. He greeted her so politely that for a moment, she forgot how powerful he was.

"I'm humbled that you would welcome this mere designer into your home," Arahnia said, smiling, even though she immediately worried that her tone made her sound sarcastic. It was hard to switch off the villain veneer that Sapphee and Tisalia always gave her a hard time about.

If I'm gonna marry the Doc, I gotta work on that, Arahnia thought to herself.

"Anyway, Plum, I've talked to your father, so now you've gotta make up with Illy."

“Kaay...” Plum averted her eyes.

Arahnia stared straight at her, unblinking, as she nursed a glass of strawberry juice. “Hello? Did you hear what I said?”

“Whaaa!” Plum cried. “Memé, help me!”

Memé, seated next to her, screamed but didn’t budge. She might have been frozen with fear.

“Memé, you come, too. You’re good at looking after ‘em,” Arahnia said with a chuckle. She liked Memé. She had sympathy for anyone with trouble setting boundaries.

“I-I can’t leave her.” Memé said through tears. “Her claws are so scary. Let go of me!”

“You’re on my side, right, Memé? Right?!”

“I’m not on anyone’s side! Why did you start that fight anyway?!” Memé stared at Plum with her large eye.

Plum put on a brave face when she walked around town, but she melted into a puddle of weakness with those she was close to. Only Memé and Arahnia ever saw this side of her. In front of Illy, she would act tough again. That was part of the reason she and Illy couldn’t get along.

“After I worked so hard to look good enough to finally go out on the town... It ticks me off that she says she doesn’t need anything but her wings to look good!”

“So what?”

“And Daddy’s always telling me to look tough in front of the other species!”

“It’s the *way* you say it!” Memé cried. “You’re no good at speaking, so you need to be careful how you word things!”

“If I could do that, then I wouldn’t be bad at speaking! Waaah!” Plum sobbed into Memé’s chest, unsure if she was sad or angry.

“Getting along with people really is hard,” Arahnia said, exasperated. But even she couldn’t bring herself to abandon Plum. She could see herself both in

Memé, who had trouble getting along with people, and Plum, with her dual nature. She couldn't just ignore them. That's why she'd come all the way to the Deadlich Hotel.

"There's no way that I can be an ambassador to the human realm! I've never even been there before! Memé, you go!"

"What?! After you tore into Illy like that, now you're scared?! I already dropped out!"

"It's because Daddy signed me up without asking! I never wanted to go." Plum lamented her lack of control over the situation.

"In that case, don't go around starting fights!"

"Oooh!"

Arahnia could relate to saying things that she didn't mean. For example, testing a friendship by saying mean things about the man her best friend loved. Back then, she'd spent so much time teasing the doctor, and now here she was engaged to him. Life really was unpredictable.

"Crying isn't going to help anything. Now that you've said you're going to aim to become the ambassador, you have to work hard to get popular, yeah?"

"Mentor, you're so harsh!"

"You brought this on yourself." Arahnia sighed.

Plum had an unenviable need to expend effort on her external appearance so she wouldn't come off as uncool. It was only natural that she wouldn't get along with someone like Illy, who didn't care about appearances.

"What a ridiculous fight between ridiculous little girls." Arahnia looked out the hotel window. She wondered how things were going at Scythia Transportation, and hoped Tisalia had taken care of things with Illy.

"Waaah! What should I do, Memé?!"

"I'm the one who should be crying!"

Plum and Memé both cried, clutching each other.

"That's enough. Both of you." Arahnia propped her elbows on the table,

exasperated. She had no idea how to settle things amicably between the two young women.

Case 02: Heat-Fatigued Gigas

SOME TIME HAD PASSED since Glenn's examination of Lulala. The Lindworm city council had issued an official warning after the aquatic council members had also predicted a storm, and the town had been hard at work preparing.

As Glenn had anticipated, there *did* seem to be a connection between the water temperature sensed by mermaids and the weather.

I wonder if Lulala will eventually be able to predict the weather, too.

"Here it is, what you've been waiting for. Loose Silk Sewing's latest product."

Arahnia was visiting the clinic. Her four arms held a swath of thick, black fabric that seemed to soak up all the light.

Sapphee didn't waste any time taking it from her.

"This is what?"

"Right. It's heat-shielding fabric. If you use it as curtains, it can keep the room nice and cool. What do you think, Sapphee?"

"That's...great, right?"

"I spoke to the atelier, and they're going to start selling parasols made with this fabric...but I also wanted to bring you one as a present first, Sapphee."

Arahnia handed her a black parasol with an embroidered flower design.

The heat didn't bother Sapphee, but she still had issues with sunlight, so this was quite the nice gesture.

"Thank you. Hopefully this will reduce the numbers of people passing out from the heat."

"Don't mention it. I'm always happy to help. Anything to reduce the Doc's burden! Make sure ya think of Loose Silk Sewing for your next purchase, yeah?"

Arahnia gave Glenn a sidelong glance.

Although she and Glenn were engaged, when she looked at him, it felt like a predator eyeing its prey.

I-I'm sure it's all in my head.

Glenn loved Arahnia, but he couldn't understand why she still wouldn't be herself with him.

"Thank you for going to the trouble," Sapphee said. "Sorry for always making such strange orders."

"You mean Plum? What to do about that one, eh?" Arahnia crossed her four arms, clearly at her wit's end.

The fairies were already hard at work hanging up the heat-shielding fabric.

"I need to do Illy and Plum's physical examinations, but neither of them have come by yet. Not that there's ever a way to predict when Plum will show up anywhere."

"She comes to town, but it's usually at night, so the clinic is closed. When I see her, I'll tell her to stop by the clinic," Arahnia said, then tilted her head. "Whether or not she'll listen is a different issue."

"Won't she do it if *you* tell her, Arahnia?" Glenn asked.

"Respect and obedience are two different things. I can be more aggressive with her than anyone else, but that doesn't mean she'll obey me. Wasn't she just here fighting? She probably feels awkward seeing you after that, Doc."

"Of course."

Arahnia spread her arms wide, splaying out a line of silk like a jump rope. "On the other hand, if you want me to bring her here by force...I'll do it!"

"No, that's fine. I'll keep an eye out for her, too."

"But don't you have a deadline?"

"Well, yes."

The day to decide on an ambassador was fast approaching, though the exact date hadn't been set yet due to the approaching storm. Still, he needed to get Illy and Plum's exams done.

"I've been telling Illy to come to the clinic, too. She hasn't come around at all. She keeps telling me to wait a little longer. I wonder what's wrong," Sapphee

pondered.

“They really are difficult.” It was just a health exam, what was she waiting for?

“Doc, you clearly have your hands full,” said Arahnia. “Let me help, too.”

“Thank you. Please take care of Plum.”

“No problem.”

Glenn smiled at his fiancée.

The fairies had switched out all of the curtains and were now folding up the old ones. The new fabric significantly reduced the amount of sunlight and noticeably reduced the temperature. Arahnia would likely sell a ton of it over the summer.

“Doctor! Doctor!”

A harpy with yellow wings rushed into the waiting room. Glenn was sure she was one of the young women who’d been trafficked.

“What’s wrong?” Sapphee asked the panicked girl.

“It’s terrible! The gigas!”

“Dione?”

The harpy nodded. “She’s passed out from heat fatigue!”

“This is getting scary.”

Lindworm’s heat wave just wouldn’t end.

Glenn looked down on the Vivre Mountains from high in the sky, his face pale.

“Ha ha ha! Don’t worry, Doctor! No one’s fallen yet!”

“Then...I hope I’m not the first.” Glenn closed his eyes, as if in prayer.

Glenn was rushing to the harpy village because he’d received a report that Dione, the gigas, had lost consciousness. A young man from the village had greeted him, and then he was rushed to the village via a strange vehicle.

“This...is the latest model?” Glenn moaned.

He was riding in what they might call a *palanquin* in the east, only instead of being carried by people in the front and back, this palanquin was flying in the air.

This is really high.

This mode of transport had been a joint development between the harpies and Scythia Transportation, in order to make trips to the harpy village more pleasant. Eight poles supported the palanquin, carried by eight flying harpies. Although it could only hold one person, it was remarkably faster than climbing the mountain on foot. The only flaw was that, since it was essentially just a chair with a roof, Glenn felt like he was floating in the air—at a height he could barely stomach.

Glenn tried to keep from looking down, but there was nothing else but sky in every direction. Still, it could have been worse. Beside him, Sapphee rode in a larger palanquin made for monsters, but her body was so big that it stuck out. Even with fourteen harpies carrying her, half of her tail was unsupported, just swinging in the air.

“Are you scared, Doctor?!” the young man asked.

“Uh, well, yeah.”

“Don’t worry! Even if you fall, there’s a lifeline, so you won’t fall far!” All the harpies laughed.

The “lifeline” was nothing more than a thick rope wrapped around Glenn’s torso. The other end was connected to the lead harpy, but Glenn couldn’t help but think that if he *did* fall, the rope might just snap. The whole setup felt way too primitive to be considered the latest model.

Glenn shook his head, trying to calm his thoughts. *Right now, I have to focus on Dione.*

The gigas had passed out from heat exhaustion. Generally speaking, the colder their habitat, the larger most creatures grew. With more body mass, they could retain more heat. Conversely, smaller creatures could dissipate heat more easily.

In other words, a giant as big as Dione would have difficulty dissipating body

heat. That might be the reason she passed out.

I hope she's okay.

"Would you prefer to go home by cart? We can contact Tisalia and ask her to pick us up," Sapphee suggested.

"Yeah...good idea," Glenn agreed. They were both pale with fear.

"But we may have to do this again in an emergency," Glenn said. "so we might as well get used to it."

"Yes." Sapphee nodded her agreement, but she still looked sick.

"Also...it's *really* hot," Glenn added.

"It seems the village is suffering from the same heat wave. No wonder Dione fell ill." Sapphee was using the parasol that Arahnia had given her to avoid the same fate.

Lulala had mentioned that the Waterways were hot, too. The water in Lindworm flowed down from the Vivre Mountains. If it was this hot mid-slope, then naturally the river temperature would rise as well. Nevertheless, this was unusual, especially considering it was still spring.

Thankfully, the heat-shielding fabric that Arahnia had brought them was also in use here in the harpy village. It hung in the entrances of houses, like curtains. Harpies' feathers protected against the cold, but they didn't do well in heat waves. The same was true for Dione, who visited the village often.

"We need to get to Dione quickly."

"Yes."

Luckily, they didn't have to search far. They saw the giant lying limply on the ground in the village square. She was surrounded by harpies, including the village chief.

"Dione, are you all right?!" Glenn cried out.

"Huh? Doctor?" Dione responded but didn't move.

Glenn felt a rush of relief. If she was conscious, then he could rule out a number of serious conditions.

“I was just eating...and then I got dizzy all of a sudden. I can’t move!”

“Just stay there. I’m going to examine you,” Glenn said, approaching her.

Dione was wearing winter clothes that Arahnia had made for her. They certainly didn’t help in this heat. She must have really liked wearing them. It looked like she’d taken her boots off to soak her feet in the river and then passed out. Luckily, there weren’t many houses nearby, and she’d fallen into the square. If she’d passed out like this in Lindworm, it would have been a mess.

That’s probably why she doesn’t come into town.

Glenn started by checking her breathing. “How do you feel, Dione? Do you have a headache or feel nauseated?” He came right up to her face.

If she rolled over right then, Glenn would be crushed. He kept an eye on her movements as he spoke to her.

“My head...is fine. I don’t think...I’m nauseated.”

“What were you doing before you passed out?”

“I was just eating...and then I got dizzy.”

“I see.” Glenn spied a tray covered in nuts.

It had probably been an offering to the gigas.

“Doctor, both her breathing and body temperature are normal,” Sapphee said calmly. “Her heartbeat is a bit weak...but it’s a normal rate for Dione.”

“Hmmm.” Glenn thought to himself.

“Doctor, how is the gigas?” the village chief asked.

“Is it from the heat?”

“I don’t believe so. She’s coherent, and her temperature is normal.”

“So...what is it?”

The harpies were all watching over Dione, looking worried.

“Well, this might be hard to believe...” Glenn looked at the faces of the harpies and then at Dione. They were all eagerly awaiting his diagnosis. “Dione

is suffering from malnutrition.”

“Whaaat?” Dione cried out.

The condition was common. She simply wasn’t getting enough nutrients for how much she was moving her body. However, this didn’t explain why she’d collapsed while eating.

“Dione is the only gigas in the world, but I’ve been studying the history of the gigas tribe with Dr. Cthulhy.”

“Ohhh. You and Miss Cthulhy sure do like to studyyy.”

Dione was probably the one person who could get away with calling Glenn’s mentor “Miss.”

“Yes, well, anyway...gigas have characteristics of both giants and plant monsters, but their metabolism is extremely slow. There’s actually a rare beast that’s quite similar to them.”

“A r-rare beast?” The village chief laughed nervously, seeming reluctant to compare Dione with a mere animal. Dione, however, didn’t seem bothered. She stared at Glenn through her bangs, rapt.

“I’m thinking of the tropical sloth. It doesn’t move much, so it’s thought of as a lazy animal. However, it’s not lazy. It survives by slowing its metabolism to the bare minimum to conserve energy.”

“Slow metabolism. So, in other words, the same as Dione?” Sapphee caught on quickly.

“Yes. And the same nutritional deficiency, even while eating, occurs in sloths, too.”

Since sloths were tropical, Glenn had never seen one. He would have liked to, but the animal apparently didn’t adapt well to other environments, so they couldn’t bring one to Lindworm. Its metabolism was so slow that it didn’t even generate its own heat. If anything, Dione was probably *more* adaptable to fluctuations in temperature.

“Doctor, I don’t really understand. What does it mean to be nutrient deficient even though you’re eating?”

“Let me explain. All living things consume energy, even while eating.”

Normally, the energy required for digestion didn’t exceed the nutrition gained from food. However, in animals with an already slow metabolism, if something caused the digestive function to slow, nutrients wouldn’t be absorbed at all.

“Basically, the strength you’re using to eat is exceeding the nutrition acquired from food. It leads to a nutritional deficiency over time. That’s why you passed out.”

“That can happen?”

“Not with normal animals, but it happens with creatures that have extremely slow metabolisms. Also, digestive capabilities are reduced in heat.”

Dione probably had low digestive capabilities in the first place and ate very little for her size. If she’d had the same metabolism as a human, she would have needed to eat a monstrous amount of food to maintain her weight.

“Ahhh, so that’s what happeneddd.” Dione took her time to understand, almost as if they were discussing some other patient. “Long ago, my fellow tribespeople passed out. Now that I think about it, maybe that was from hunger, too. At the time, we didn’t know the reasonn.”

“It’s hard to recognize on your own that you’re not getting enough.” Even if someone felt sick, if they were in the middle of eating, it probably wouldn’t even cross their mind that they could be lacking nutrients.

“Yeahhh.” Dione giggled. “Now I understanddd.”

“So, what can we do?” the village chief asked.

“First, we need to supplement her intake,” Glenn said. “Harpies, can you please help me?”

Treatment for a giant like Dione was never easy. He needed the cooperation of the entire village. Luckily, the gigas was loved by all, and not a single harpy complained.

“Doctor, you look sharp!” Dione said. “You’ve grown uppp!”

“O-oh, thank you.” Glenn chuckled at her carefree attitude, which remained undaunted, despite her collapse.

First, Sapphee needed to inject Dione with nutrients.

“Doctor, it’s no use,” Sapphee said, the ampoule still in her hand. “Her skin is too tough. The needle won’t pierce it.”

“Hmm, is that so?”

Dione’s skin was as hard as tree bark, which meant an injection or an IV drip was out of the question.

“We’ll need a special needle, but we don’t have time to prepare one now.”

“No, we don’t,” Sapphee concurred.

“In that case, we’ll have to feed her.”

Dione needed nutrients. If they couldn’t run an IV, then she’d have to eat something. The problem was whether or not she even had the strength to eat. Her reduced digestive capability meant they’d have to try something easy to digest, like a soft stew.

“Dione, do you think you could eat rice porridge?”

“Ahhh, I like, rice porridgge!”

Glenn nodded. That might work. “Then we’ll prepare it right away.”

Before long, the harpies had made a rice porridge per Glenn’s instructions. They served it in a large pot that had been cooled to just the right temperature, so there was no concern of Dione being burned. Glenn was stirring the porridge with a long ladle, looking more like a chef than a doctor.

“Now, then,” Glenn said.

He was standing on a platform that the harpies had fashioned for him, right in front of Dione’s face. Glenn found the arrangement odd, but Dione didn’t seem to mind at all, especially since she couldn’t feed herself, or even move, in this state.

“Dione, please eat slowly so you won’t upset your stomach.”

“Yeahhh,” Dione said, opening her mouth wide.

Glenn couldn’t help but notice that if she wanted to, she could swallow him whole. Taking care not to let his foot slip, he spoonfed Dione. The milk had

been boiled into the rice for too long on purpose, so it was mostly a pulpy white liquid. It didn't look very appetizing, but solid food wouldn't be good for Dione right now. Boiling it down to mush was just right.

"Mmm...mm..." Dione moaned as she slowly chewed. "Mm, nom..."

Glenn watched her carefully. The important thing was to stay calm, matching Dione's movements.

"You don't need to rush. Take your time swallowing. Your digestive organs are weakened, so you can't eat a lot right now."

"Thank youuu, buttt I'm always slowww." Dione grinned.

She was good at taking her time. But this was also what had led to her nutrient deficiency. Even though the gigas were revered as gods, they had a harder time living than other creatures.

I wonder if that's why she's alone now.

If there was only one gigas left, then that meant Glenn was the only doctor who'd examined one. Cthulhy had met Dione before but had never examined her. Learning how to care for Dione's health was just one of the many missions that Glenn needed to fulfill.

"Ahhh..." Dione opened wide again, waiting for the next spoonful.

Glenn scooped up more rice porridge and poured it into Dione's mouth. When the sticky white substance touched Dione's tongue, she started chewing.

"Mmm, nom..."

Then she swallowed it all.

"How does it taste?" Glenn asked.

"Mmm... Well, I thinkkk."

"You think what?"

"It's not enougggh..." Dione looked perplexed.

This was inevitable. The amount of porridge Glenn could scoop up in the ladle wasn't even a mouthful for Dione. Of course she wouldn't feel like she was truly eating. The pot next to Glenn was enough to feed a dozen humans, but it wasn't

even one meal for Dione.

“Sooo, I don’t really know what it tastes likkke.”

“Yes, you’re right. Sorry. But I don’t think it would be good for you to eat a lot right now.”

“Yeahhh, I never eat a lottt.”

“Once you’re better, you should start eating more,” Glenn said as he fed her the next spoonful.

He could see Sapphee watching from below. She was probably remembering the time Glenn had lost his footing while examining Dione.

Well, I’m not going to fall this time, Glenn thought to himself. He’d learned his lesson.

Dione opened her mouth wide again. When he’d fallen last time, he’d been buried in her chest and nearly suffocated to death. If he took a wrong step this time, he’d fall into her mouth.

“Here you go.”

“Mmm...mmm...nom.”

Each individual tooth was the size of Glenn’s whole body, and the large, undulating tongue was like a huge, ultra-thick snake. Each time Dione swallowed, he could hear the sound of the porridge sliding down her throat. Glenn swallowed hard himself. If he fell in, he’d be torn to shreds.

“Mmm-ahhh.”

After each swallow, Dione opened her mouth again without Glenn even saying anything. He was beginning to move by muscle memory. The next time Glenn went to pour a spoonful in, he missed a little. The porridge stuck to Dione’s large lip.

“Oh, sorry!”

“Yeahhh, it’s really harddd.”

The thick, gooey liquid started to dribble down. Dione stuck out her tongue to catch it, the massive red mass passing right by Glenn’s platform. She licked her

lip clean.

“Perhaps I should put it directly into your mouth instead of dropping it in.”

Glenn’s platform was a bit of a certain distance away from Dione. To reach all the way into her mouth with the spoon, he would need to stretch his arms out as far as possible.

“Don’t worry about ittt,” Dione said.

But Glenn *did* worry about it. At this rate, there was a good chance he’d miss again.

“No, I think it will be better if I feed you properly,” Glenn said. “The sensation of having an actual meal is important for promoting gastrointestinal activity.”

Glenn got on his knees and stretched out his arms, aiming the ladle of rice porridge directly into Dione’s mouth.

“Hmm...it’s difficult,” he muttered.

“Ahhh, don’t hurt yourself...ahm.” Dione grew flustered as she reached for the ladle, her huge tongue moving right by his hand.



Okay...it's a little difficult, but we can do this!

Food wasn't just about absorbing nutrients. It was also about the flavor, who you ate with, and what you celebrated. Truly *enjoying* a meal promoted gastrointestinal activity and led to good health. That's why mental unrest often manifested first with stomach issues.

Then again...

Even though it felt less like work and more like a meal when he fed her directly, Glenn wasn't sure if the porridge actually counted as a meal for Dione.

"Ehh, heeey!" The gigas smiled broadly. "Tee hee! I'm happy. I can't remember anyone ever feeding me in my entire life."

"Dione..."

"I'm happy to be able to say *ahhh...*"

"Well, that's good to hear." Glenn smiled back.

Without any other members of her species to keep her company, there was no one Dione could have fed or been fed by. Glenn hadn't realized he was offering her such a valuable experience.

I'm glad for her.

If Dione was feeling up to smiling, then that meant she was starting to recover. But just as Glenn was beginning to have some hope— "Umph?!"

He hadn't been concentrating, and his foot slipped.

"Oh, no!"

Dione moved swiftly as soon as she saw Glenn fall.

"Ahm!"

She caught the doctor in her open mouth.

"Er!" It felt like his entire body was wrapped in a slimy, sticky tongue. Glenn held his breath, unable even to scream.

"Mmm, nom...nom..."

"Er!"

Dione's tongue undulated. Now that Glenn was in her mouth, Dione didn't know what to do with him.

"Th-thank you, Dione."

"Mmmm...nom."

"I'll get out myself, so please try not to move too much."

"Mmm."

The only silver lining was that Glenn's face was free, so once he got over his fear, he was able to communicate with Dione. He could *feel* her giant teeth pressing against his body. If Dione wasn't careful, she'd accidentally bite him in two.

"D-Doctor, I'm coming!" He heard Sapphee's voice coming from somewhere far away, but he couldn't see a thing outside of Dione's mouth.

How do I get out of this?

He went over the problem in his mind. He'd fallen from the platform, and Dione had caught him. Her giant tongue had acted as a cushion, and now he was gently stuck between her lips, completely inside Dione's mouth from the shoulders down.

"Oooh...ngdo..." Dione was equally perplexed as to how to get Glenn out.

If Dione could use her hands, that might have made things easier. But it was clear to Glenn that she was half in a panic.

"Mmm, ahm-ahm-ahm."

She'd gotten him out before when he was stuck in her bosom, but she'd also lost her grip and dropped him back in again. He didn't want to make the same mistake twice.

Dione's tongue was starting to tickle.

"Mm, mmm!"

With Glenn in her mouth, she couldn't form coherent sentences. Glenn's clothes were soaked with her saliva, and every time her tongue moved, Glenn feared he would be eaten, even though he knew she had no intention of doing

so.

“Okay...one, two...”

Glenn tried to use her teeth for support and push himself out of the top of her mouth. Dione seemed to be using her tongue to try to help him. She couldn't just open her mouth and spit him out—there was no telling how or where he'd land if she did so. It was a delicate endeavor, like tying a cherry stem with your tongue.

It's even harder than I thought.

Glenn moaned. His entire body was drenched. If he slipped down any further, he might engage Dione's gag reflex and force her to start coughing.

I want to avoid that.

He'd once seen Dione sneeze...and the terrible aftermath that followed. If he was spit out with that much force, he'd fly through the air and slam into the ground. The very thought made Glenn pale in the face. He redoubled his efforts, pushing against Dione's slippery teeth and somehow lifting his torso out of her mouth with a slurping sound.

“O-okay...now I need to somehow...”

Glenn was interrupted by Dione's tongue touching his feet.

“Mmm? Nom, gulp.”

She was trying to read Glenn's next move and keep her thick tongue out of his way. Given how long her tongue had been on him, he wondered if this counted as a kiss.

No...this isn't the time for those sorts of thoughts.

“Ngmo?”

Dione let out a strange sound, as if she'd read Glenn's thoughts.

“I'm going to touch your lips a little.”

“Mmo, mmm!”

Glenn interpreted this as consent and began to press against her lips. He figured from here he could probably get himself out the rest of the way, but

then— “Mmaaggh!”

Glenn felt his body moving upward.

“Oh, ohhh...”

“Mmbayyy.” Dione stuck her tongue out.

Glenn was being pushed up toward the platform. Sapphee was already there, and she snaked her tail around his body, pulling him toward her.

“Doctor! Would you stop falling into Dione?!”

“S-sorry! I’ll be more careful!”

Dione’s exam ended up sapping far more stamina than he’d anticipated. He might have to start working out.

“Are you okaay? I’m glad you’re not hurttt.”

Glenn stared at Dione, dripping with spit.

“Thank you. You saved me.”

“Yeahhh, it would have been terrible if I accidentally swallowed youuu.”

Dione was sweet as always. Glenn really felt relieved despite the embarrassment at his own clumsiness.

“I’m amazed you didn’t drop the ladle,” Sapphee said.

“Y-yes...”

Glenn had done everything he could to hang on to the ladle while in Dione’s mouth.

“Now, then. We shall continue after I’ve changed my clothes.”

It wouldn’t be sanitary to feed Dione while covered in her saliva. The rice porridge would have to be remade, too.

“That’s fiiine. I can waittt.” Dione smiled wide, revealing her cave-like mouth.

Glenn felt a chill run down his spine.

He vowed to be extra careful going forward, so he wouldn’t come that close to being swallowed ever again.

Glenn bathed and changed before resuming Dione's feeding. This time there were no spills, and Dione was able to finish off the rice porridge. Afterward she rested for a while, until she'd recovered enough to sit up. Soon, she'd fallen asleep with her knees to her chest. It was probably more comfortable for her that way. There were few places where she could truly stretch out.

"Oh, good!" Sapphee said. "It looks like Dione is feeling better."

"Yes...she enjoyed her meal."

Glenn was pleased that her digestive capabilities had returned. You can't sleep on an empty stomach, and she needed sleep to recover from the heat fatigue.

"The harpies work fast, too." Glenn said, looking up.

"I think they're used to it," Sapphee answered.

"I'm glad to see that Arahnia's heat-shielding fabric is already being put to good use."

Great swathes of it had been secured to either side of the valley, creating a makeshift awning that covered the entire village in shadow. The pegs hammered into the surrounding cliffs wouldn't come out easily. The harpies had ensured that Dione's digestive capabilities wouldn't be diminished again by the heat.

"Do you think the gigas will recover now, Doctor?" the young man that had led them here asked.

"Yes, I think she'll be fine. Please keep her as cool as possible."

"Understood."

"Also, there are rumblings of a storm coming, so please be careful."

"Yes, we've heard. But this awning can be folded up if necessary, so please don't worry!" the young man replied confidently. Perhaps the harpies were used to disasters.

Sadly, there were no houses large enough for Dione to shelter in, but at least

she could keep cool under the awning.

“Goodbye, then,” the young man said, returning to his work.

Glenn heaved a sigh of relief.

“Mmm?” Dione rubbed her eyes. They’d probably woken her with their conversation. “Was I sleeping? Hey, it’s cool now.” She opened her mouth in a big yawn.

Glenn felt another chill as he remembered being stuck inside that mouth.

“Ohhh, what is this shade?”

“The harpies put up an awning for you,” Sapphee said cheerfully.

“I see. Heh heh! They’re always taking care of meee.” Dione laughed.

“Those clothes you’re wearing are made for winter,” Glenn said. “You should remove them when you can move again.”

“Okayyy, I will.” Dione was always easygoing.

Under different circumstances, Glenn might have suggested that she change right away, but there was no one who could possibly help her. She’d have to do it herself, which meant she’d have to wait. But with the shade from the awning and the river right there, she could probably keep her temperature down for now. There was no hurry.

“Gigas have it rougggh,” Dione muttered. “I’m sure we weren’t made to liiive.”

“Dione, you shouldn’t say things like that.”

“Hee hee! You’re sweeet. But it’s okay. I understaaand. I mean, nutritional deficiency while eating is weeeird. If we’d known everything you just taught me, then the gigas wouldn’t have died ooout.”

Glenn didn’t know what to say. Sometimes evolution led to interesting places. Even adaptations that seemed strange to humans always existed for a reason. That said, species went extinct all the time because they couldn’t adapt.

“If only you’d been around thousands of years ago. Maybe my kin would have been savvved.” Dione giggled. “Hee hee! Don’t look at me like thattt. I know it’s

impossiblle. And that might not even be the reason. I've wondered before if they died from the common colddd."

There were probably many reasons why the gigas had died out. Perhaps one of them was that they took everything too lightly. Dione's own personality was incredibly easygoing, which was a nice way of saying that she lacked the ability to sense danger...a potentially fatal trait.

"Dione, this might be a bit too personal, but..." Sapphee looked up at the gigas. "Have you ever considered having children?"

"Children?"

"Your species is unique, but you're still a monster. Most monsters can mate with humans and have children. Your child could also mate with humans, and your species could continue."

"I seee."

Though it remained a biological mystery, monsters and humans could indeed breed. There were many such couples in Lindworm, and Glenn and Sapphee would join them once they were married.

In most cases, the children of these couples inherited monster attributes. For species like arachne, which were all women, female children were born as arachne and male children were born as humans. No one could say for sure without testing it, but Dione *should* be able to breed with humans.

"Is it something you want to consider, Dione?" Glenn asked.

Dione would die someday. It was important for her species to survive. But more importantly, she should be able to share her life with her own kind. Glenn wanted to help her experience that.

"It is a wonderful thoughtt, but..." Dione said. "I'm too different from other speciesss. I'd always be afraid of crushing my...boyfriend? Husbanddd?"

"Is that so?"

"What if I eat them by accident, like I almost did with Glenn?"

Dione had a point. It was easy to say that love would be enough, but the size difference presented a significant hurdle. A hurdle that couldn't be overcome

with mere words.

"I'm sorry for bringing it up," Sapphee said.

"It's fiiine. Of course...I envy beautiful briides." Dione chuckled. "You two are engaged, riiight?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry we didn't tell you."

"Yeahhh. When I see you two, I think, 'Hey, marriage looks great, you know? I wonder if there's anyone for mee?'"

Glenn stared into her eyes, partially hidden behind her hair. For some reason, when she'd asked this question, she'd looked straight at him.

"Dione, you'll live a long life! You've got plenty of time to find a good man!"

She was gripping Glenn's hand with her tail. He looked at her quizzically, not understanding what was going on.

"You're riiight. Maybe someday I can become a beautiful wiiife."

Survival of the species. The last of a nearly extinct monster. Despite the severity of the situation, Dione was as relaxed as ever.

"I'll do everything I can to make sure you live as long as possible, Dione. I'll work hard to understand your biology so you'll always stay healthy."

"Thank you very muchhh." Dione looked around. There was food here, and an awning, and a whole village of harpies to look after her. "The gigas died out because life is tough. But if everyone helps each other, maybe that's enougggh?"

"That's one way to look at it."

"Heeey, even if I don't marry...I'm happyyy." Dione smiled, looking down at Glenn and Sapphee, who were holding hands.

Sapphee and Glenn decided to spend the night in the harpy village. Scythia Transportation would pick them up the next day. They would stay in the temporary housing where they'd stayed in the past.

"Heeey, it's already time for everyone to eeeat."

Dione's dinner was rice porridge again, with nuts mixed in this time. Glenn and Sapphee took the opportunity to enjoy a meal together on the riverbank. The fruits and nuts in the village were very nutritious. As usual, Sapphee was drinking alcohol.

"That reminds mee," Dione said. "Lately, Illy has been going to a spring deep in the mountains. What's that abouuut?"

Glenn and Sapphee looked at each other. They hadn't heard this.

"A spring...in the mountains?"

"Yesss. She seems so busyyy. I'm lonely because she won't talk to mee. Why does she keep flying off?"

"Is this spring used for something?"

"Sometimes the harpies go there to baaathe, but it's nothing speciall, you know?"

Glenn tilted his head. Illy was always busy working, delivering the post. He couldn't even get a hold of her to perform her physical exam. He'd thought that after her fight with Plum she might have felt awkward around him. But maybe that wasn't the case. Why would she go so far to bathe if she was busy with work? There was a bathhouse at Scythia Transportation, after all.

"I also want to see Illy. I need to examine her for the ambassador election, but she hasn't let me yet."

"Is that riiight? I wonder whyyy?" Dione tilted her head to the side.

Does it have to do with her going all that way to the spring?

Was she doing something at the spring to prepare for the exam? But what would she even do there besides bathe?

"It's so lonelyyy when Illy doesn't visit mee," Dione said sadly.

"Maybe there's a reason she feels awkward right now."

Dione looked at Glenn quizzically,

"Apparently she was fighting with another young woman in town."

Glenn wasn't sure it was the best idea, but he decided to tell Dione about the

fight. Ever since Illy, who loved to fly, and Dione, who lived on a mountaintop, had first met, Illy had been the one to bring news of the town to Dione.

"Perhaps the fight is difficult for her to talk about," Glenn suggested.

"She probably thinks you'll worry about her, Dione." Sapphee sipped her date sake, which was brewed right here in the village.

Glenn thought that it was sweet of Illy to avoid Dione so that she wouldn't worry.

"I seee. Fighting is no goood. If Illy comes around, I'll tell her to see you, Doctorrr."

"Thank you very much."

"Let's all be friendsss. Otherwise..." Dione brushed aside her hair, revealing wide, innocent eyes. "We'll all go extinctt."

Heavy words from the massive gigas.

"Ehh, just kiddinggg!" Dione laughed, back to her normal, carefree self in an instant.

But Glenn couldn't even bring himself to smile.

Case 03: Ruffled Harpy

“**A**ND...why have you come here?” Memé asked, with a tear in her eye.

She always seemed to have a tear in her eye these days, but that was another issue. Just now, all she could focus on was the harpy with red wings that had entered her accessory shop.

“I wanted to ask you something, Memé.”

Illy scratched her head. She hadn’t even looked at any of the products on display. But she wasn’t looking Memé straight in the eye, either. In fact, she seemed to be averting her gaze. Many people found it difficult to look at Memé’s enormous eyeball.

“Memé, why are you on that vampire’s side? Does she have some dirt on you?”

“N-no, nothing like that! I’m not on *anyone*’s side. I just...don’t want anyone to fight.”

“But you two looked close.”

“Oooh, not at all! Why would anyone be close with *me*?!”

This self-deprecating denial confused Illy. “What about me and Lulala and—”

“Everyone is important to me! Plum is the same!”

“Wait, what? I’m even more confused now.” Illy had never been very good when it came to complicated interpersonal dynamics. She was beginning to lose track of the original problem. “Why are you crying?”

“*You’re* the one coming in here and saying weird things! You’re asking me why I’m on my friend’s side? Of course I’m on my friend’s side!”

“Okay, okay! I’m sorry! Back off a bit, would you?” Illy turned pale at the looming eye.

Memé let out a sobbing breath. “Just...make up with her already.”

"But I mean...we weren't even close to begin with," Illy said. "What would making up look like? Ugh, I can't stand her arrogance."

"She's not arrogant." Memé seemed to have settled down somewhat. She returned to her work at the anvil. "She acts so high and mighty because she's afraid of being looked down upon."

"Huh? How do you know that?" Illy asked.

"Uh, well...I guess I don't, really." Memé's large eye wandered around the room.

"Memé, your face gives everything away."

"I-I said I don't know anything!" Memé cried. "If you're going to be like that, I just won't say anything! Nothing! I'll never talk again! Ugh!"

Illy sighed. She knew Memé was close with Plum, but that wasn't an excuse to just take her side no matter what!

"I know I'm not just imagining it..."

"D-did you say something?" Memé asked.

"Nah. It's nothing."

Illy couldn't just change her personality. Even if the issue was all on her end, it didn't mean she could just get along with someone she didn't like.

"Yo, are you here, Memé? Oh!"

"Oh."

Another customer had entered the accessory shop. It was Plum, the source of Illy's distress.

"A-ahhh..."

Plum and Illy glared at each other, neither of them moving. Memé seemed panicked, her eye darting back and forth between the two.

"Well, I need to make my deliveries. Bye, Memé!" Illy flapped her wings and flew out of the store.

Plum and Memé stood there dumbfounded.

“Wh-what was that?!” Plum said, after a moment. “She’s so rude! She didn’t even say hi!”

“Sh-she left so there wouldn’t be a fight. And *you* didn’t say hi, either.”

“Daddy said that noble vampires mustn’t greet other species first!”

“Youuu!” Memé glared at her, but Plum didn’t seem to notice. Clearly, her father was a bad influence.

“If she was going to leave anyway, she could’ve at least made an effort to depart amicably!”

“So could you!”

Now all too aware of Plum’s dual nature, Memé decided to stop filtering herself in front of her. She narrowed her eye.

Plum ignored her. “And to come all this way to the accessory shop and not buy anything? How rude!”

“What, so she could be like you? The one who buys way too much every time she visits? It’s not easy to put out so many new products, you know!”

Plum finally seemed to realize what Memé was saying. “Whose side are you on?!”

“Ugh! I just had this conversation!”

Memé had had enough. She tightened her grip on the small hammer she used to make accessories. She wasn’t swinging it around or anything, but Plum’s face twitched all the same.

“Ah. Memé, I’m sorry! Be careful with that!”

“Unbelievable.” Memé heaved a big sigh. Why could Plum apologize so easily to her, but Illy couldn’t?

The young vampire started browsing the store, as if nothing was amiss. The clothes that had been torn when she fought with Illy were back to their original state. Plum didn’t know if Memé had repaired the clothes or if they were brand new, and she didn’t care.

There’s no way Plum will apologize.

Memé couldn't believe this was the same person who'd been crying in the graveyard district hotel. Plum wanted to be thought of as cool. She refused to show any weakness, which was why she would never apologize to Illy.

It's important to mend things, but if I'm not careful, she'll call me stupid. Ahhh, it's ridiculous for someone like me to try and figure this stuff out. I'm terrible at mending things!

Memé clutched her head. She desperately wanted them to make up, but at this rate, it would be an endless battle of wills.

"What's wrong, Memé?" Plum asked impudently. "Why are you holding your head and groaning?"

"Oooh, all my friends have been coming to the store lately. It's too much! I'm going to die."

"Friends? You mean me? You should be happy!" Plum laughed, blissfully ignorant of what Memé was really thinking.

Then again, Memé thought, I think Illy's feathers were a little ruffled.

Illy's was very proud of her wings. She probably groomed them daily. Memé's craftsman's eye could tell when a feather was askew.

There's too much to think about. I think I'm getting a fever.

Plum hummed as she browsed the accessories, completely oblivious to Memé's woes.

Sometime later, Glenn was organizing examination records at the Lindworm Clinic.

"Hmmm..."

The heat hadn't abated. The rumor that a storm was brewing had spread throughout Lindworm, but every single day was clear and sunny, and more and more residents were coming down with heatstroke. Since it was still spring, that also meant that it might even get worse.

"Doctor? What's wrong?" Sapphee was preparing coffee.

"I was just hoping that Illy and the others are taking care of themselves in this climate."

"When do you think you can perform the physical exams?"

"I don't even know where they are."

Both Illy and Plum could fly, which made it even harder for a land-dweller like Glenn to get ahold of them.

Sapphee sighed. "I asked Tisalia and Arahnia to tell the girls to come to the clinic, but..."

"But they're probably avoiding us."

A doctor couldn't do anything for a patient he couldn't meet with. Maybe if they had some symptoms they'd make it more of a priority, but it probably seemed strange to them to go to the clinic without any indications of illness. Of course, the exam was intended to find any such symptoms, but younger people didn't place physicals high on their list of priorities.

"They seemed fine when they were fighting," Sapphee said, "so I really want to just issue them a clean bill of health."

"Hey, now." Glenn scolded her. "Even if they seem healthy, that doesn't mean they can handle a long journey. They need real examinations."

"Of course I know that. But if they won't come see you..."

"Yeah, that's a problem." Glenn sipped his coffee.

They couldn't put it off forever. He needed to complete both their exams before the storm arrived.

"I'll make some time to search for them tomorrow," Glenn said.

"Just...be careful walking around in this heat. We can't have our doctor collapsing."

"I will," Glenn promised.

He was particularly worried about Illy, who was apparently bathing in a spring deep in the mountains. If the town was this hot, the temperature of the spring had to be pretty high, too.

I need to examine her as soon as possible.

Glenn frowned as he drained his cup of coffee.

That's when it happened.

"Oh?" Sapphee turned around.

The closed sign was already out on the clinic door, but someone was ringing the bell.

"Who is it?" Sapphee called. "The doctor is out for the day."

She and Glenn headed toward the waiting room.

Someone was standing there, wrapped in a dark robe despite the heat. They couldn't see the figure's face, but the feathers—reddish feathers—peeking out from beneath the robe suggested it was a harpy.

Is it...Illy?

"Waaah! Doctooor!" Illy threw off her robe and embraced Glenn.

"W-wait a second!" Sapphee protested.

Illy's feathers were all ruffled and bristled. She looked atrocious.

"M-my feathers! Just look at them! What should I do? I...I don't know what to do!"

"Okay, okay. It's going to be fine. Settle down."

Glenn remained calm as he stroked the sobbing Illy. This wasn't the time to perform a physical exam. He couldn't decide if it was good or bad that his prediction had actually come true.

"Have you calmed down?"

"Y-yes." Illy nodded. Her crest feathers were flat, conveying her melancholy.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Sapphee asked. "Your feathers wouldn't become so disheveled from your daily activities, would they?"

The health of many monsters could be assessed by their body hair, or in this case, feathers. The cause wasn't always the same, but just as humans' faces

grew pale when they were feeling unwell, abnormalities in monsters' hair indicated illness.

"Well...I don't really know. How did this happen?"

"Have you been eating and sleeping properly?"

"Of course! Perfectly! I've been sleeping better than I could ever imagine, and I'm eating, too! Sometimes there are even feasts at the Lady's mansion."

Illy seemed so happy in her life now, which made Glenn even more concerned about her ruffled feathers. He began the examination.

"We heard you've been visiting a spring in the mountains."

"Huh?! How did you know that? I was being so careful... Ah, did you hear it from Dione?"

"Don't worry about where we heard it from."

"Err...but that probably isn't related, is it?"

"Can you tell us about it anyway?"

"I-I was just bathing!" Illy's face turned beet red, and she averted her eyes.

Glenn explained that the bathing might be what had caused her ruffled feathers. "Can't you bathe in Lindworm?"

"W-well..."

"If you don't tell us what's really going on, then we can't provide you with the best treatment."

Illy turned pale at Sapphee's warning. She must have been quite upset that the feathers she was so proud of were now a mess. That's why she'd brought her disheveled self to the clinic.

"I wanted...to make my wings beautiful."

"Beautiful?"

"Yeah, she—Plum—said not to show off just because I had wings. It made me so upset! I thought if I bathed and made them sparkle, then she'd have to shut her big mouth, so I went to the spring." Illy sounded as though she were on the

verge of tears.

“Why did you go all the way to the mountains for that?”

“All the harpies say that if you bathe there, your feathers will become beautiful. I thought it would be worth the trip if there was even half a chance that was true.”

“Hmm.”

Glenn was growing more and more curious. A rumor like that must have started with some kernel of truth. For example, maybe springs in the mountains had nutrients that were good for feathers. He began musing about the difference in water quality between mountain spring water and the Vivre River...but no. Now wasn't the time for that.

“But...the more I washed, the worse my feathers got! I thought maybe I hadn't washed them enough, so I kept going back.”

“How often did you go?”

“About three times a day, between my deliveries.”

“That's the cause,” Glenn said with a sigh.

Illy stared at him blankly. Even if the spring didn't make feathers prettier, she couldn't understand why more washing was a bad thing.

“When you bathe too much, you strip away the preen oil from the surface of your feathers.”

“Preen oil?”

“It's a sebum excreted by birds and harpies. You rub the sebum excreted from the base of your tail feathers all over your body, right?”

“Oh! You mean the stuff that makes my feathers shiny during grooming?” Illy said. “That's called sebum?!”

Neither humans nor monsters had perfect knowledge of their own bodies. Furthermore, Illy hadn't ever received a proper education. Normally, harpies learned at least some things from their parents, but Illy didn't even have that. Glenn's chest tightened as he remembered what she'd been through as a child.

“Didn’t you hear about this from other harpies?”

“Mmm...not really. I don’t have any friends who I could talk about grooming with. I’ve always been so proud of my wings...I *couldn’t* ask anyone.”

Glenn chuckled. Wings were a sign of status among harpies. They admired unique coloring like Illy’s. Asking how to care for such magnificent wings would be admitting weakness.

“The bodies of both humans and monsters are protected by a certain amount of sebum. In the case of harpies, you apply the preen oil secreted from the base of your tail feathers to the feathers over your entire body.”

“Like this!”

Illy folded her wings and skillfully rubbed them together with her tail feathers. She hid her head inside her wings, so it wouldn’t get in the way. Her neck was more flexible than a human’s. “Kush, kush, choob...” She chanted as she rubbed. The protection preen oil granted was necessary for flying and maintaining body temperature.

“But my feathers have never turned out like this after bathing in water or sand!”

“Preen oil has water-repellent effects. But in warm water, it starts to melt. The spring was especially warm this year, wasn’t it?”

“Now that you mention it, it was. Like midsummer. I thought since it wasn’t cold, I could bathe all the time.”

“That’s the answer, then. If you’d only bathed once a day, it would have been fine. But you went multiple times a day, and you were washing with warm water. It’s almost like you were *trying* to remove the preen oil from your wings.”

“So, the oil... If I rub it on again, then I’ll go back to normal?”

“Yes. But you need to cut back on baths. Washing more doesn’t necessarily make your wings more beautiful. Do you understand that now?”

“Yeah...I understand.” Illy’s normal cheerfulness was gone. She was completely despondent.

She'd probably never imagined that trying to make her wings more beautiful would have had the opposite result.

"Plum said I wasn't trying enough."

"Was that when you fought?" Sapphee asked.

Illy nodded. "I'm not interested in covering myself in jewelry like her...but she was right. I just want everyone to think my feathers are beautiful! That's why I thought I needed to do more."

"Illy..."

"But that wasn't the way. I thought if I took good care of myself, then...maybe she wouldn't look down on me."

Glenn finally understood fully. Illy had been trying to make up with Plum in her own way, by taking her advice. It was the only way she knew how.

"Well, let's start by fixing your wings. After that, I can try to help you make up with her, if you like."

"N-no, it's fine. Doctor, do you have friends? Have you ever made up with someone before?"

"Er," Glenn groaned. It was a sensitive topic for him.

As a student, he'd always been studying. Now he was preoccupied with work. Glenn didn't actually have any friends his own age, so the question stung. He couldn't remember making up with anyone because he couldn't even remember having a friend to fight with. Illy's innocent question pierced his very soul.

"Hey, Illy! That's a rude thing to ask!"

"Huh?! You really *don't* have friends? O-oh, I'm sorry!" Illy frantically flapped her wings.

"B-but even if you *don't* have friends, you have lots of fiancées!"

"Th-thank you?" He couldn't tell if this was supposed to be comforting.

Glenn hated that, when he tried to think of friends, he could only come up with his brother. And even Souen was ten years older than him.

“Let’s forget about my relationships for now. Right now, we need to do something about your preen oil.”

“I can do it myself.”

“No, it’s come off your entire body. We need to reapply it.”

It was actually similar to the treatment for Lulala’s weakened mucous membrane. The difference was that one was for flying and the other for swimming. Only...preen oil couldn’t be replicated so easily. It was an extremely high-quality substance that both cleaned and protected.

“Show me the base of your tail feathers, Illy,” Glenn said casually.

“Wh-what?” Illy turned bright red, but she complied.

“Now, then...I will begin.”

“Ooooh, this is embarrassing!”

Glenn moved his face close to Illy’s behind. Not the actual buttocks, but just above. He was observing the tail feathers growing from her lower back. From the base, they separated into three locks in seven different colors, depending on the angle. The tips of the tail feathers were decorative, like peacocks.

“I’m going to lift your feathers a little.”

“O-okay...”

Hidden at the base of the tail feathers, where a human’s tailbone would be, was a hole covered in down. The organ wasn’t obvious unless you were looking for it, but the uropygial gland was what allowed birds to secrete preen oil. A bit of liquid was seeping out of Illy’s.

Glenn looked closer.

“Oooh, it’s like you’re looking at my butt! It’s so embarrassing!”

“I’m only looking at the place where the preen oil comes out,” Glenn assured her.

“I-I know, but...”

“I’m going to extract the preen oil and apply it to your feathers.”

"I-I'm sure it's fine, since you're a doctor, but...be gentle. My feathers are very important to me."

"Yes, I know. Just remember, this is also about your health. Without preen oil, you'll attract insects, and could even lose the ability to fly."

Illy turned her head toward Glenn, looking worried. He pulled out a soft-bristled brush.

"Now, I will begin."

"Oooh, don't smell me or anything, okay?"

"I wouldn't do that. Don't worry." Glenn chuckled as he put the brush to the uropygial gland. He soaked up the liquid from the middle of the withering feathers.

"Mmm...ah...oh..." Illy let out a cry as he stroked her gland.

"The good news is...there appear to be no abnormalities."

Glenn had already determined that the lack of preen oil had been caused by excessive bathing, but there was an outside chance an issue with the uropygial gland could have contributed to the issue. Thankfully, there was plenty of oil on the brush. The bristles were already shining.

"I'm going to apply the oil to your feathers, starting with your tail."

"O-okay... Ahhh!" Illy trembled, her rear end sticking high into the air.

Glenn took the tail feathers in his hand and gently applied the brush.

"Eeee...w-wait...I'm ticklish!"

Apparently, this kind of gentle touching irritated Illy. Her back was quivering, and she looked like a fearful parrot.

"Mmm! Ah, ya, aya!"

"I'm sorry, but if I rub too hard, then it will damage your wings. You don't want to lose even a single feather, do you?"

"O-of course not, but..." Illy's face was red, and her tail feathers trembled even harder.

“Don’t move too much,” Glenn warned.

“Ah...mmm...oooh...I-I know...”

Illy was trying her best to stay still, but it seemed to be very difficult for her. Glenn continued to brush gently from base to tip, making sure that the feathers were all lying in the same direction. The effects of the preen oil were tremendous, and with repeated brushing, Illy’s feathers were already starting to regain their shine.

In the east, sumac sap was used to protect expensive tableware. Like the sap, preen oil gave the feathers luster and protected harpies from dirt and unwanted bacteria.

“Here we go,” Glenn said as he put the brush to the uropygial gland again.

“Agh!” Illy cried out when he touched the hole on her lower back. Glenn ignored her, soaking up the oil with the brush.

“I’m going to apply it again.”

“O-okay, I-I’ll do my best!”

At first glance, her feathers seemed to be a single mass, but each feather was actually a collection of fine hairs connected to a hard shaft. It was the preen oil that kept those fine hairs in line. Glenn needed to be thorough...to make sure the oil reached each individual hair.

“Mm, ahh, waaah...”

Glenn brushed the oil over every inch of every tail feather, from base to tip.

“Mmm...ahhh...aggh...”

“I think this is about right.” Glenn nodded as he looked at Illy’s bright red tail feathers.

He had abundant experience brushing, and he considered himself to be quite skilled at it. He’d accurately assessed how her feathers were growing and had gently arranged their fibers so as not to damage them.

“How are you doing, Illy? I think it already looks much better.”

“Uhh, are you done already?”

Illy used her flexible neck to turn and look behind her. As soon as she saw her tail feathers sleekly shining, she screamed with glee.

“Wow! Amazing! How can they change so much? They were so bristled before.”

“They were just lacking preen oil, so they went back to normal as soon as I reapplied it,” Glenn explained.

“Wooow!”

It wasn’t just Illy’s feathers. Her eyes were sparkling, too. She was spellbound by Glenn’s technique.

“Let’s take a little break,” Sapphee said as she slithered into the exam room. “Drink this.” She held a glass that contained an orange liquid.

“Huh? What is this?”

“It’s freshly squeezed vegetable juice,” Glenn said. “Mostly carrots. It has the nutrients you need to produce preen oil. Vegetables are especially important.” He’d asked Sapphee to make the juice before he even started the exam. “Do you not like vegetables?”

“I like them! Sometimes I get them from the Lady’s mansion.” Illy laughed, showing her double rows of teeth. She gulped down the entire glass. “It’s so good!” she exclaimed.

“I bet it is. The vegetables are from Aluloona’s plantation.” Sapphee smiled. “I’ll make another glass.”

Cutting up carrots and squeezing them into juice was difficult but necessary. Glenn was grateful for Sapphee, who executed every task flawlessly.

“Let’s continue,” Glenn said. “Next, I’ll work on the essentials—your wings.”

“Make them sparkle, too, Doctor!” Illy grinned.

The uneasy expression she’d worn when she arrived at the clinic had disappeared. Now that her tail was back to normal, she was also back to her cheerful self.

As it turned out, the condition of her feathers had been affecting Illy mentally.

Once her wings were shiny again, her whole disposition would probably change. Glenn just hoped that this would lead to her making up with Plum.

“Now, then. Let’s have you spread your wings. Maybe you need a cushion?”

Glenn asked the fairies to bring one for her. They brought one large enough to be used as a chair.

“Lie on this. Don’t sit on it. Lie on your stomach.”

“Huh? Like this?” Illy lay face down.

Supported by the cushion, she looked like she was on all fours. If she’d been sitting normally, he wouldn’t have been able to reach the gland at the base of her tail feathers.

“That’s perfect. I’ll begin with the right wing,” Glenn said, spreading out the feathers.

She was small for a monster, but her wingspan was impressive. Even just one outstretched wing took up a lot of space.

Glenn moved to Illy’s backside and put the brush to her uropygial gland.

“Mmm, th-that tickles!” Illy writhed from the sensation, but Glenn ignored her. He took the brush to her right wing.

“Mmm...ahh...oww...” Illy was moaning again. Perhaps because she was embarrassed, she tried to move her left wing to cover her mouth. “Ahhh... mmm... B-be gentle...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you.”

“Uh, aggh, ahhh! Noo!”

Glenn continued to brush from her body out to her wingtips. He stroked the ruffled spots gently to repair the damaged feathers.

“Oooh, I-I said I’m ticklish! Agh, mm, mmm!”

Illy kept moving around, but Glenn was pinning her with his body so her wing stayed still.

“I’m going to keep going,” Glenn said, as he applied more preen oil.

“Ah...Agh, mmm!”

Every time Glenn took oil from the gland at the base of her tail feathers, Illy screeched. The uropygial gland was in a place that really shouldn’t have been touched. It was too sensitive.

“Ahh! Aggh, haaa! Agh, ahhn!” Illy squirmed.

This is going to take some time. I need to be thorough.

Illy’s red wings were like a gorgeous piece of art. No wonder she was proud of them. However, even though they were still bright, the coloring was uneven due to the ruffled feathers. Right now, they looked more painful than beautiful. Glenn fixed each individual ruffle with the brush.

“Mmm, ahh!”

After a few moments, Illy’s reactions began to change. She was still making noise, but she didn’t have any strength left in her body.

“Whooo...ahh, ahhn...”

“Does it still hurt?”

“W-well...it just tickles a little,” she said. “I think maybe I’ve gotten used to it.”



“You’ve relaxed.”

It was a laborious treatment. It only made sense that her body would succumb to it.

“Mmm...agh...you can keep going.”

“Good. I’m not even halfway done yet.” Glenn chuckled.

“Mmm...mphh...mm,” Illy moaned, her expression like that of someone dreaming.

“Hmm? Are you sleepy?” Glenn asked.

The cushion was supporting her body. It wasn’t all that different from lying on a bed.

“You can sleep. It’s going to take a lot more time anyway.”

“Mmm...no, I’ll stay...awake...” Illy said, but she was already half-asleep.

Glenn laughed to himself, watching over her like a caring older brother.

Illy had grown up in the slums without any parents. She’d moved around the monster realm, sometimes joining the street children, but she never stayed anywhere for long.

That was because she always got in fights.

In one town, she’d fought with the beast who looked after her and then fled.

In another, a group of nuns took care of her, but one of them was always on her case, so she ran away.

That was how Illy used to live. She would disagree with someone, they would fight, and then Illy would fly off somewhere else.

In other words, she didn’t know how to make up with people.

What is my problem?

She’d thought things were going well in Lindworm. Lulala, Memé, and all the young women in the harpy village were so nice. Illy had been trying her best to be as cheerful as possible so she wouldn’t get into fights.

Until Plum came along.

She just came out fighting. She never wanted to get along with me!

If the same thing had happened in another town, she would have just moved again. But things were different now. She had a job. And friends.

Illy had no intention of throwing her life away just because she'd fought with Plum. Her only choice was to make amends. She *had* to.

What should I do?

Illy ruminated as she lay half asleep while her wings were being pampered. She'd never made up with anyone before. Every time things got uncomfortable, she'd leave rather than trying to repair the relationship.

I don't know how to make up with someone...but I do know one thing.

Plum was envious of Illy's wings and the fact that she didn't need to dress up to look good.

Illy also knew that Plum needed to fix their relationship as much as she did. Plum couldn't just leave Lindworm, either. She couldn't even fly long distances. Nor could she stay holed up in the graveyard district forever. At the very least, she had to come into town to buy the accessories she loved so much.

Illy knew these things for sure. Now she just needed a plan.

I'm fine. I can do it.

She believed this.

Once my wings are back to normal, I'll try talking to her.

Plum was a pain in the butt, but if Illy was going to live in this town, she needed to get along with her.

That was why...

That was why she would...

"Ahhmm?!"

Startled by her own voice, Illy was abruptly woken from her dreamlike state. She saw Glenn, right beside her, concentrating on brushing.

“Mm! Aggh, wh-what?!”

“Oh, sorry, did I wake you up?”

Illy had been dozing while Glenn brushed her, but now her eyes were open. Her crest feathers stood straight up, quivering.

“I’m almost done,” Glenn assured her.

“Hee... Mmmagh...w-wait. Be gentle.”

“I’m trying to be gentle.”

Harpy wings were incredibly sensitive. They had to be in order to perform the delicate operation of flight. Which meant that, even as gentle as Glenn was being, his careful brushing might feel stimulating in some spots. This was especially true since he was stroking one feather at a time.

“But look! They’re much prettier now!”

“Uh...ah, yeah. That’s true, but...”

Illy’s feathers were shining like new. There were still some places where the fibers were bristled, but they were minor enough that Illy could fix them while grooming herself. It was a testament to Glenn’s skillful brushing.

“Now, for the final touch.”

“Huh, mmm! Agh, wh-why just the tips?!”

“If I’m not thorough with the quills, it will affect your flying,” Glenn said.

“Oh, I see. Th-then make sure I can fly! Mm, mmph, aggh.” Illy accepted Glenn’s explanation, but that didn’t change how it felt.

“Does it hurt?”

“I-it doesn’t hurt, but... Mmph, mmm! Oof, i-it tickles.”

Glenn nodded. There were no nerves in the actual feathers, but they were deeply linked to muscles. On top of that, the rustling sensation as the preen oil was applied seemed to be irritating Illy.

“Mmmahh...ooh, hey!”

Glenn touched her tail feathers again. He had to replenish the oil on the brush from her uropygial gland regularly. Anyone walking by who didn't know what was going on would certainly misunderstand the act they were engaged in.

Glenn lifted Illy's tail feathers and stroked her gland.

"Mmm, eee...agh!" Illy squirmed, clearly sensitive to his touch.

Her clothes were made to accommodate the feathers growing on her rear end, so she hadn't needed to take any clothes off for this procedure.

"Aggh...ow! Mm... Mmm!"

Glenn was back to brushing the particularly large wing feathers. Illy's body twitched.

"Okay, this is the last bit."

"Mmm! Ow...oof..."

When Glenn finally put down the brush, Illy collapsed on the cushion. She didn't even have enough strength to keep herself upright.

"Ooooh, uggh! Why do I always get like this when the doctor is examining meee?" she moaned. She kicked her feet and flapped her wings.

"I'm not sure what to do about that." Glenn chuckled. Illy glared at him with tears in her eyes.

"If you went through all that and didn't fix my feathers, I'm going to be angry!"

"They're fine. See for yourself," Glenn said.

Her reddish wings had regained their shine. The protective effects of the preen oil were so dramatic that they didn't even look like the same feathers.

"Thanks," Illy said, looking away from Glenn, perhaps out of embarrassment.

"You're welcome." Glenn smiled.

He was thinking about what a handful the young women of this town—Lulala, Illy, Memé, and Plum—could be.

"You secreted a lot of preen oil, so make sure you eat well today," Sapphee instructed Illy.

It was the evening of the same day. Illy was staying in the clinic, not as a patient, but as a guest. She needed to replenish the nutrients she'd used. To allow her to do that, Glenn and Sapphee had decided that she should stay the night.

"Mmm...I never truly eat to the point of being full."

"That would keep you from flying, eh?" Glenn chuckled.

Harpies divided their meals into small portions. They often ate small amounts of foods with high nutritional content, like nuts. A full stomach could obstruct their flying. They also didn't drink water to their hearts' content. They maintained stomachs that were never completely full or empty.

That's why Illy felt conflicted about the food before her. She flew even more often than most harpies, so she'd normally want to avoid a full stomach.

"You must be exhausted. Besides, you don't have to fly today, so you can eat more than usual. I'll contact the harpy village." Glenn started to hand the fairies a letter, but Illy shook her head.

"Oh, you don't need to do that. The village chief knows I'm working in town... and I often stay at the Lady's house! I'm not a child. You don't need to follow up on everything."

"That's good to hear. In that case, please just relax."

Illy's eyes were gleaming as she looked at the food Sapphee had lined up on the table.

"Doctor, what are you going to report to the council?" Sapphee sat down and picked up a glass of wine.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Illy asked as she took a bite of roast beef.

"Your health exam. Haven't you been told repeatedly that you needed to do that?"

"Oh! I forgot! I felt so awkward..." Illy looked away from them as she chewed. She really *did* seem to be embarrassed about her fight with Plum.

"Illy didn't have any ailments aside from her ruffled feathers. She's healthy, so you can report that to the council. She can go to the human realm without any problems."

"Understood," Sapphee said.

Illy looked depressed. "The human realm..."

The ambassador to the human realm would make efforts for cultural exchange between monsters and humans. However, Illy had formerly been captured by humans. It was only natural that she was reluctant. It had even contributed to her fight with Plum.

"You don't want to go east?"

"I don't mind going," Illy said. "I even delivered a letter to you there once, Doctor."

She was referring to the time when Glenn was visiting his parents' home. During the trip, Illy had brought him an urgent letter. She could fly across the sea on her own.

"But I wouldn't make a good representative. Lulala and Memé are far more loved than I am. And, well, there are a lot of reasons. But..."

"But what?"

"I *do* think I'm more popular than Plum!"

Glenn couldn't help but laugh at Illy's competitiveness.

Sapphee was looking away, trying to stifle her own laughter. Glenn was worried she might spit out her wine.

"I don't want to lose to her! Especially after she made so much fun of me!"

"You two need to get along," Glenn said.

"Yeah. I know." Illy frowned. She was gracefully holding a fork with one of her wings, eating salad.

Glenn wondered if the two of them would ever be able to make amends.

"Who cares?" Sapphee said, waving the wine glass with her tail.

“Huh?” Illy was confused.

“Obviously, we can’t have you fighting. That would increase the doctor’s workload and worry everyone. But all you really need to do is be civil to each other during the election. If you want to resolve everything once and for all, that’s great, but you don’t *need* to get along.”

“We...don’t?”

“I’m just saying...you can’t hit or scratch each other, but once the election’s over, that’s that.”

“Hunh. I suppose you’re right,” Illy muttered.

This whole line of thinking made Glenn anxious. He wasn’t the only one who wanted Illy and Plum to be friends. Lulala and Memé were invested in their relationship, too.

“You know, Tisalia and I don’t get along,” Sapphee said.

“Even though you’re sister wives?” Illy’s eyes were round with surprise.

From Glenn’s point of view, Sapphee and Tisalia got along just fine. Then again, they weren’t exactly what you’d call good friends.

“Because we’re sister wives. Neither of us wants to share Dr. Glenn. We’re still ending up in a polygamous relationship, but *I*’ll be the lawful wife.”

“Isn’t it the same for Arahnia?” Illy asked.

“It’s complicated. I’m good friends with Arahnia. But with Tisalia, it’s more like...we don’t have good chemistry. I don’t really know how to explain it.”

Glenn had three fiancées. They were all civil to each other on the surface, but more complicated feelings seemed to be simmering underneath. Maybe it would help if Glenn intervened, but he just wasn’t a mediator. Besides, he was also married to his work.

“Anyway, everyone has something they won’t budge on. Why does it matter if we’re close or not?”

“Hmmm?”

“In the end, we both like the same person, and we’re making do.”

This was all getting a little abstract. Illy looked even more confused than before.

“So, even if you decide to make up with Plum, it doesn’t mean there won’t be more trouble ahead,” Sapphee said. “If that happens, just make sure you don’t get hurt.”

“Now that you mention it, I think the Lady said something similar,” Illy recalled, her crest feathers sticking straight up. “She said to peacefully smash her into the ground! That’s what you’re saying, right?”

“Not at all! Don’t compare what I say to that former mercenary!”

“So, the Scythias really *were* mercenaries?” Illy asked. Then perhaps realizing she shouldn’t bring up harmful rumors about Tisalia around Glenn, she said, “Anyway, you’re right! We’ll settle it in the ambassador election!”

Sapphee had lit the torch, and now Illy was running with it.

I-I hope this goes well.

Glenn was still uneasy, but given Illy’s quick temper, perhaps this was the best way.

“It sounds like Plum wants to settle who’s at the top, too!”

“That’s not—”

“No, it’s true,” Illy said casually. “I mean, she probably likes me.”

Glenn and Sapphee both looked puzzled.

“What do you mean...likes you?”

“N-not me, necessarily...but maybe my wings! That Plum likes pretty things, so she loves my wings. She should just say it!”

“Ha ha!”

Illy really was confident about her appearance. Also, she was probably right. Plum liked dressing up, so she probably *did* admire Illy’s beautiful wings. It was always the things you couldn’t have that you admired the most.

“No matter who wins the election, I’ll still have a roof over my head and food to eat, so I should just go for it!”

Glenn could only laugh at the contrast between Illy's spoken indifference and the way she looked like she was preparing for war. Perhaps she *enjoyed* fighting.

"Settling your score is fine," he said, "but after that, I personally hope you two will make up."

"I'll try for your sake, Doctor," Illy replied, taking another bite of meat.

"You should do it for yourself and for Plum, not for me," Glenn said.

"Okay, I will," Illy said. "Even though I'm pretty sure Plum wants to win at everything—the ambassador election, fashion—even more than I do."

Perhaps this feud would continue. It sure looked that way to Glenn. Though he hoped that talking to Sapphee had worn Illy down a little.

How will this all turn out?

Glenn suddenly got the sense that there was a strong wind blowing outside the clinic, a rare occurrence in Lindworm.

A large storm might be brewing after all, just as the mermaids had predicted.

Case 04: The Vampire with Vertigo

IT WAS THE DAY AFTER Glenn had treated Illy.

A strong wind was beating against the window. The sky was dark, even though it was the middle of the day. Stacks of thick clouds hung in the air, buffeted by the wind. The fairies were busily closing all the shutters. It wasn't raining yet, but it could start at any moment. There was no question now. A storm was coming.

"Doctor, all the shutters are closed."

"Thanks, Sapphee."

There weren't many patients in the clinic, perhaps because everyone was preparing for the storm. Thanks to the advance warning, however, no one was panicking. Even though it was only just past noon, the neighborhood shops were already starting to close. The clinic was open, but with no patients, there seemed little point.

"I really wanted to finish Plum's exam before the storm arrived." Glenn sighed.

"There's nothing you can do if she doesn't come."

"Yeah..."

He'd planned to go out and look for Plum himself, but with the imminent downpour, he'd decided to stay in.

"I'm glad Illy's planning to settle things with Plum," Sapphee remarked.

"Thanks to the seed you planted."

"I know. But that young woman has a history of fighting and then fleeing," Sapphee said. "If she keeps it up, she won't stay in this town long."

She almost seemed to be scolding herself, but this was typical of Sapphee. She might blurt out advice without thinking, but she was good at looking after people.

“Our ballots arrived,” she said, changing the subject. “Who are we going to vote for?”

“Oh, right. We have to vote, too.”

“Right. One vote each.”

Glenn wasn’t sure what to do. The final candidates for ambassador were Illy and Plum. Even though Plum hadn’t completed her physical exam, Glenn still had to make a choice.

“No matter who wins, there’s going to be trouble.”

“I want to vote for Plum, because if Illy wins, I think it will be worse.”

“Hmmm...”

Glenn wondered if that were true. Would it be any better if Plum won? He didn’t think so. They weren’t fighting about who would be elected. This whole election had just been a trigger. The best case scenario would be if they used this as an opportunity to speak honestly to each other. Sapphee clearly wanted the same thing, but ultimately, they had to want it for themselves. There was a limit to how much others could help.

“Well...it won’t do us much good to dwell on it,” Sapphee said. “I’m going to close the front door.”

“Oh, you don’t need to.”

“Huh? What about the storm, Doctor?”

“That’s exactly why we should leave the door open and unlocked. Someone might be hit by flying debris. I believe both the plantation and the factory are staying open up until the last minute. I want it to be clear that we’re open, in case of an emergency.”

“As you wish, Doctor.” Sapphee sighed. “But I don’t think anyone will come. Will you at least take one night off to rest?”

“Yeah, I will,” he responded.

Sapphee smiled as she left the exam room.

Storms were rare in Lindworm. Old roof tiles, tree branches, and other

objects would likely be hurled into the air. Then there were the Waterways. There *should* be enough drainage, but there was always the possibility of flooding if more rain fell than anticipated.

Although, there aren't any records of floods.

Glenn shook his head. Just like illness, there was no telling how and when a natural disaster might strike. Illness could at least be countered by a doctor, but there wasn't much that could be done for weather.

Hopefully no one will come tonight.

Glenn chuckled to himself. Of course it would be better if fewer patients showed up. But his hope wasn't limited to that night alone. He never wanted many patients to come.

Around that same time, Memé's accessory shop was preparing to close. It had been open since the morning, but there hadn't been many customers. The weather was steadily getting worse. Memé's boss and caretaker had told her to go home early. Memé had already finished preparing to close up shop, but she couldn't go home because there was still a customer in the store.

"Why are you here?" Memé asked, with a tear in her eye.

Plum regarded her curiously, as if this was a ridiculous question. "I mean, the election's coming up, yeah? I don't want to wear anything but the best, even when I'm just walking down the street. Ya know?"

"But there's a storm coming."

"Huh? Really?"

"Don't you know that? I mean, you can just look outside! The sky is covered with clouds, and there's a terrible wind blowing!"

"The darker the better. It's so nice out today!"

"The world isn't spinning just for you!"

Plum didn't seem to mind Memé's glare one bit. "Well, I can fly even in storms."

“I-it’s dangerous! C’mom, go home. I want to close the shop!”

“Mmm...just a few more minutes.” Plum’s chin rested on her claws as she contemplated. “Okay, I got it. Gimme this!”

“You’re buying more earrings? How many do you have now?”

“You stop making them, and I’ll stop buying them! Besides, owning jewelry makes me so happy!”

“It’s because of you that new products are so rare here! You shouldn’t buy everything up as soon as I put it out!”

“It’s great business for you!” Plum was unapologetic. “Doesn’t it make you happy?”

It really was thanks to Plum that Memé’s shop was profitable. It allowed her to contribute to the atelier and gave her the freedom to make what she wanted. She appreciated that, but still... It wasn’t fair for Plum to take all the new products for herself. Each of them was handmade, so there was a limit to how much she could produce. She wanted to shake the shop’s reputation of only selling older items, but that would require Plum to stop buying up her new stock.

“Ugh! Next time I’m going to limit you to one product only!”

“I’m sorry, but with this many accessories, I’m a shoo-in for the ambassador election! And if that bright red harpy loses, she’ll come groveling!”

Even Memé knew this was a silly scheme. “Illy doesn’t really care who wins the election. She’s more upset about you slandering her wings.”

“I think her wings are pretty! But it pisses me off that she’s so boastful about it.”

“Illy’s not trying to be boastful. But her identity is tied to her wings. Slandering them is the same as slandering her.”

Plum was silent.

Memé always looked flustered, but this whole situation particularly bothered her. Why wouldn’t either of them just apologize? But in the end, she was just a bystander. All she could offer was advice.

"Th-that means you should apologize to Illy," Memé added.

"Impossible. I didn't do anything wrong!" Plum pouted. "And it's not like she would forgive me even if I *did* apologize. It's far too late now..." Her voice trailed off, as if she were ashamed of her actions.

Plum's indecisiveness reminded Memé of herself. They were a lot alike.

Ugggh!

Memé was angry. Plum just did whatever she wanted with no regard for others, then didn't even *consider* making up with them.

There was a saying among monsters, "Ask the cyclops who will win the war."

Long ago, the cyclops tribe had sold weapons to both sides in a war within the monster realm. Even though they claimed to be neutral, with all the information about how each side was armed, they'd been able to predict the outcome.

Sometimes, a third party could see things that neither of the involved parties had noticed. Memé was in that position now. She wasn't skilled at advocating for herself, but she could certainly advocate for others.

"Plum! Are you willing to make up with her or not?!"

"Whaaa! Memé, are you mad?"

"Of course I'm mad! I've just been listening to my friends whine about their fight for ages!"

"Errr..." Memé's uncharacteristic outburst genuinely frightened Plum. "M-Memé, if you would just see my side, then—"

"Your *side*?" Memé felt something snap inside of her. "Side, side, side! Neither of you cares that I'm worried. You don't care about me at all!"

"M-Memé?" Plum poked the cyclops with her wing claw.

"I told you! I'm not on anyone's side! Aggh!"

"Whoa!"

"Cyclopes have made weapons throughout history, but the only war we ever fought in was against humans! We've always remained neutral! I don't care if

you fight with Illy! I'm not on anyone's side. I'm not on anyone's side!"

Memé took back the new earrings Plum was trying to purchase.

"This is it! I've had enough! I'm not selling you another product until you two make up!"

"Whaat?! Why would you do that?! C'mon, Memé!"

"It's your own fault for not making up with her!" Memé hollered.

Frightened by this new, threatening attitude, Plum drew back.

However, Memé's rage hadn't spent itself yet. "Now, there's a storm today, so go home! I'm closing up shop!"

"Oooh, Memé you're so mean!"

"I'm not mean! This has been a long time coming!" Memé leaped over the counter to stand in front of Plum. "If you have no intention of making up, then I have no intention of selling you anything in this store!"

"Memé!"

"I don't care if you cry! I've made up my mind!"

Plum could never have anticipated that self-deprecating, mild-mannered Memé would get this angry. It frightened her. But Memé paid Plum's tears no mind, instead using her incredible strength to push the vampire out of the store.

"There you go! We're closed now! Next time you come, bring Illy!"

"W-wait, Memé!"

"Thank you very much!" And with that, she slammed the door.

Plum sighed and looked up at the sky, dumbfounded.

"What just happened? Ugh!"

She had no words for this new, forceful side of Memé.

The wind was blowing strong in Lindworm, and fat raindrops had begun to fall from the cloudy sky.

Plum had been kicked out of Memé's shop, but she wasn't about to go back to the graveyard district. Ignoring the fact that her favorite outfit was getting wet, she aimlessly flew around above the roofs of the town, unable to shake the hopeless feeling inside her.

Why?

She wept as she flew, her tears mixing with the rain.

She never had any trouble flying, even in storms, and skillfully dodged bits of wood and debris. Her giant wings could withstand the kind of wind that would send others flying.

Why doesn't anyone understand me?

Plum bit her lip and closed her eyes. Echolocation allowed her to grasp the shape of the town even better than sight.

A tower appeared in front of her. She landed on the roof in the raging wind.

Whyyy?!

“Beee!” She cried out in anger.

The scream was too high-pitched for most other species to hear. She emitted a sound wave and then listened to it bounce back to get an accurate grasp of the position, distance, and shape of surrounding objects.

But the echolocation of vampires far surpassed that of bats. Vampire vocal cords were made of a tough muscle that could emit hundreds of sound waves per second. This allowed Plum to fly even in heavy rain. The ability was so remarkable that she didn't fully understand its true power. As far as she knew, echolocation was pretty much the same as hearing. The collection of sounds bouncing back to her gave her a picture of the town, whether or not her eyes were closed. A picture far more accurate than human sight.

“Ugh...”

Plum was wet from the rain, but she didn't care. “What should I do?”

Even though she could fly in the storm, she had nowhere to go. On top of that, the tiny hairs on her wings were growing heavy with water. Her clothes were sticking to her. She felt gross and desperate. At first, she'd enjoyed the

sensation of flying in the rain, but she'd tired of it quickly.

"Ahhh, I can't do this!"

The best thing would be to see Illy right away and apologize. That's what Memé wanted, and Plum was sure that apologizing would resolve the fight. But no one was out in this storm except for her.

"I guess I'll go home."

Once the storm abated, she would seek out Illy and make up with her. She decided to put off everything until tomorrow and return to the graveyard district. She'd just launched herself off the roof when— "Umph!"

An extremely thick cloth struck her in the face, covering it. Normally, her sound waves reflected off hard things well, and even echoed against water, but there'd been no echo off of this cloth fluttering in the wind. She hadn't been able to detect it.

It took her a moment to realize that this was a piece of the heat-shielding cloth being used all over town to counter the unseasonable warmth. But it was no help to her now.

"Aggh! Get out of my face!"

She pulled the cloth off and continued flying. Her eyes had already been closed, so she'd still been able to fly even with her sight obstructed by the thick cloth.

"Aggh?!"

But then she collided with something.

Wh-what?! What just happened?!

Plum opened her eyes. There was a steeple right in front of her. There shouldn't have been any large structures in Lindworm that didn't reflect sound.

Unless...could I not hear the echo?!

Vampires had superior vocal cords, but they also had superior ears. Their hearing was important for collecting reflected sounds. But she hadn't heard them this time. Or perhaps she'd misheard the distance, location, or size. Either

way, there was something wrong with her hearing. She tried to maintain control, even though her forehead was bleeding.

Uuugh...I'm going to fall!

The wind and rain were very strong. Even though they could navigate in such conditions, vampires weren't necessarily the best flyers. Once they lost the right wind, it took time to recover. Moreover, Plum was now dizzy, and in no condition to perform the precise maneuvers required for flying. That was what echolocation was supposed to help with in the first place.

No...this is bad. Am...am I going to die here?

She felt like she was going to fall, and her entire body grew stiff with fear.

“Noo!” she screamed, but it was drowned out by the wind and rain.

Plum had accepted the fact that she was going to fall when she heard a voice on the air.

“Youuu!”

Ouch!

A sharp pain ran through her, but Plum had lost the capacity to care.

“You! What are you doing here? You look like you’re going to fall!”

“Who are you?” Plum moaned.

She’d closed her eyes again, dizzy from the blow to her head. But someone’s voice kept pounding in her brain.

“You’d know if you looked! You’re bleeding! It’s running in your eyes!”

“Hmmm?”

Sometimes, Plum couldn’t really distinguish between her sight and hearing. Sensitivities were different for each species. Dog-like beasts had a heightened sense of smell, lamia could see the world through temperature, and Plum’s world was made from reflected sounds. What she knew at that moment was that some harpy was acting as if this storm was nothing and carrying Plum to safety with her legs.

“Is that you, Illy?”

“Ahh, ugh! Did you finally figure it out?! Don’t worry, we’re going to the clinic!”

“Why...are you...out in this storm?”

“Hmph! Don’t take Lindworm’s top courier for a weakling!”

Illy flapped her wings with remarkable strength. Even without opening her eyes, Plum could tell by the way she rode the wind.

It was beautiful.

Illy was unbearably gorgeous, both inside and out.

“Lucky...” Plum bit her lip as Illy carried her.

“Huh?! Did you say something?!” Illy, with her average hearing, couldn’t pick up the sound of Plum’s voice through the rain.

“It was nothing,” Plum answered brusquely.

The storm kept raging. Plum hoped that Illy would never know of the envy in her heart.

“Doctor! It’s an emergency!”

Glenn had been organizing his records when he heard a pounding on the door. The voice was Illy’s.

“It’s open!” he called.

“What? Open? Oh!”

When Illy realized the door was unlocked, she flew into the waiting room. At first, Glenn thought she’d come alone. Then he realized she was carrying someone. It was Plum, soaking wet and listless.

“Doctor! Hurry!”

“Okay, fine! You were right, Doctor.” A lantern hung from Sapphee’s tail as she slithered into the waiting room.

Glenn shrugged into his lab coat and ran to join her.

“First of all, wipe the water from your body, Illy,” Glenn said.

“Y-yeah! Oh, but Plum! She’s hurt, on her head!”

“It’s okay, I’ll examine her right away.” Glenn took the vampire from Illy. As a flying monster, she was surprisingly light.

“Er...”

“Fairies, bring all the cloth we have. And disinfectant.” Glenn didn’t hesitate. He was already examining Plum’s head, where the blood was streaming from.

“How did this happen?”

“She ran into the Lind steeple!” Illy exclaimed. “She shouldn’t have been flying in this storm! She would have fallen if I wasn’t there!”

“Shut up!” Plum moaned. “You were out flying, too...”

“I was working! I was delivering medicine and food! My company was operating up until the last minute. Even as we speak, the Lady, Kay, and Lorna are *still* pulling heavy horse carts around!”

Plum grew quiet, embarrassed.

Glenn wasn’t exactly sure what was going on, but he knew that Plum had no reason for flying around in the middle of a storm.

“I’d just decided to go home!” Illy cried. “That’s when I saw you about to fall!”

“Er...” Plum looked down, unable to speak. Her long ears drooped.

“Okay, okay,” Glenn said. “That’s enough for now. Let me take a look at Plum’s wound. Illy, you dry yourself off.”

“I know! I don’t want the oil to come off again!” Illy shook her entire body, dispelling the water from her wings. The fairies dodged the flying droplets.

Since Glenn had reapplied the preen oil, her feathers were amply water-resistant. This was why she’d been able to fly in the storm, in addition to her natural intuition about air currents.

“Hey, now, you’re getting the floor all wet!” Sapphee scolded. “Let’s get you to the bath, Illy.”

“Oh, yes.” Illy obeyed.

Glenn watched them out of the corner of his eye as he turned back to Plum. "Now, then."

Plum was bleeding from an open wound on her forehead, and the blood had run down into her eyes. The wound itself wasn't that deep, but there was significant swelling.

"I'm going to treat you now."

"Mmm," Plum let out a moan.

After Glenn wiped away the blood, he disinfected the wound. Then he covered it with gauze.

"Okay, you should be fine now."

"Oooh, thank you, Doctor." Plum bowed her head apologetically.

The fairies wiped down her entire body, and she began to look a little better. She was probably lethargic because her body temperature had dropped.

She doesn't seem to have a concussion. That's something, at least.

Glenn heard she'd flown into a steeple, but she must not have been traveling very fast. Maybe she'd been a little lightheaded from the violent winds and had already reduced her speed. In any case, it could have been a lot worse.

But the more he thought about it, the more he realized there was something strange about the whole incident.

"Plum, can I ask you a question?"

She looked at him, waiting.

"Were you emitting sound waves when you were flying?"

Naturally, Glenn knew about echolocation. Long ago, a researcher had used an audible range greater than that of humans to ascertain that bats emitted sound waves as they flew. Glenn remembered reading that paper. Given the similarities between bats and vampires, it only made sense that the latter used echolocation, too.

"Y-yeah...but I didn't sense that there was a tower there."

"If you were unable to hear the echoes, then there might be a problem with

your hearing."

"Hmmm..." Plum cocked her head. "But I can hear you just fine right now, Doctor."

"Hmph." Glenn examined Plum's ears.

They stuck straight up out of her head, like a bat's ears. She was wearing earrings that had probably been made by Memé.

"Maybe you got some water in them?" Glenn suggested.

"They don't hurt, though."

"Hmmm."

If she had water in her ears, then she would have experienced pain or at least an uncomfortable sensation.

"Can I look inside?"

"O-okay..."

Once he had Plum's permission, Glenn began touching one of her long, slender ears. It twitched in response.

"There's something in here."

"Huh?! What do you mean?!"

"Something small and...round. It's shining in the back of your auditory canal."

Wax buildup was a common cause of issues like this, but Plum's ears were clean. Considering the shape, whatever was stuck inside her probably wasn't wax.

"Plum, you really don't feel like there's something in your ear that shouldn't be?" Glenn asked again.

"N-no, not really..."

"I wonder if something *fell* in. It doesn't look pointy, so maybe that's why it doesn't hurt. What could it be?"

Glenn took out his microscope goggles so he could examine the foreign object more closely. They'd come in handy when he was connecting Kunai's nerves,

and now they'd help him with Plum. He looked in her ear again.

"Oooh, I feel so...embarrassed."

"Hold still," he said. "If I don't take this out, then you'll crash again if you try to fly."

"Yeah," Plum said, quivering. She couldn't relax while he was examining her.

Glenn looked deep inside her ear with his goggles. The object looked like a piece of polished metal shaped into a perfect sphere, clearly manufactured.

"I wonder what it is. It's round...and it's metal, not stone..." Glenn muttered to himself.

"Er!" Plum suddenly twitched.

"D-Doctor! I'm sorry, but I need a minute!" Plum cried out, flustered.

Puzzled, Glenn moved away from her. She lifted her wings over her head, touching her own ears with her claws. After a moment, it became clear that she was removing her earring.

"Ahh! I was right!" Plum cried. "The top of this earring is missing! It must have come off in the storm!" Plum showed Glenn the jewelry.

The small sphere must have been connected to the rest of the earring. If she were a human with a standard lobe piercing, the piece might have fallen off, but not into the ear. However, Plum's ears stretched straight up from the top of her head, so if something fell off of an earring, it would probably land in her ear.

"Ahhh, Memé made these earrings for me."

Now Glenn understood. The metal had been intentionally processed into a smooth sphere so that it wouldn't hurt the auditory canal. It was evidence of Memé's skill.

"If we get the piece out, I'm sure Memé will fix the earring for you," Glenn assured her.

"Yeah, if we do that... Ahhh!"

For a moment, Glenn thought Plum was happy, but her expression quickly grew dark.

"No, um, I..." Plum averted her eyes, looking like she was about to cry.

"Memé said she won't sell me anything until I make up with Illy...so she probably won't fix it for me."

"Then I guess you'll just have to make up with Illy," Glenn said. "With the wind as strong as it is, I bet she'll be here in the clinic for a while. This is your chance to apologize."

As if in response, the shutters rattled. Illy clearly wouldn't be flying in this weather.

"But first things first, we need to take this out."

"Er..."

The reason for Plum's crash was clear now. A metal sphere was blocking her ability to hear echoes. In the past, accessories she'd worn had damaged the webbing of her wings. It didn't bother Glenn that she cared so much about her appearance, but he wished she'd pay a bit more attention to her health.

I can't overlook the fact that she went out flying in a storm.

Glenn heaved a sigh. If she and Illy didn't resolve things soon, something like this might happen again. They *needed* to make up, for both their sakes.

"Ooooh, how are you going to get it out? Would it help if I hung upside down?"

Now that Plum was aware of the object, it had started to bother her. Since bats slept upside down, Glenn suddenly wondered if vampires did the same. It seemed like all the blood would rush to their heads. But no...they probably slept in coffins, as was tradition.

"It's really stuck in the canal. I don't think it will fall out easily. Shall I use a special tool to take it out?" Glenn asked.

"Aggh...that sounds kind of scary."

Plum's ears were standing at attention. She scared more easily than Glenn had expected. But if they tried to take it out with claws or fingers, there was a risk of it getting lodged even deeper and damaging her ear. Glenn decided it would be better to act with caution.

Ideally, they would have let it come out on its own, but there was no telling when that might happen, and Plum wouldn't be able to fly until it did. The inside of her ear was wet, so if they weren't careful, mold might start to grow around the foreign object.

"It will be fine. I won't hurt you." Glenn smiled reassuringly.

"O-kay..." Plum sat in the exam chair.

In order to get a better angle, Glenn stood up and stared down into her ear. Plum's face was now at the height of Glenn's chest.

"H-how does it look?" Plum asked anxiously.

Glenn couldn't see her face from where he was, but he could tell she was frightened of the long tweezers he was brandishing. Plum's ears had a fair amount of downy hair to keep objects like this from falling in. Also, there was a complicated fold that allowed her to accurately grasp the positions of reflected sounds. The hole itself extended from the base of her ear all the way up to this fold. It was larger than that of other animals to help with echolocation, but that also made it the perfect size for something to get caught in.

Owls were another animal with superior hearing. An owl's earhole was so big that you could see its eyeballs from the back when looking in. Memé probably hadn't realized that vampires' earholes were so large. She never would have imagined that a piece of an earring would get caught inside.

"Okay, I'm going in now."

"Mmm...aaahh."

Glenn wasn't sure what this response meant, but he carefully inserted the tweezers into her ear. If he made a mistake now, he could permanently damage her hearing.

I hope I can retrieve it.

The tweezers were actually more like a stick with a small grabber on the end. When he operated the lever by his hand, the grabber opened and closed. It was handy for wax buildup, too.

"Mmm...oooh... It's like you're cleaning my ears! Mmm..."

"Ha ha! You're welcome to think that. Just a second...I think I've got it."

Glenn operated the lever, but it wasn't designed for spherical shapes. He couldn't seem to get a good grip.

"Mmm, whewww..."

Every time the tool moved, Plum moaned with discomfort.

"Ahh, ahn, unmm..."

Hmm, what to do?

Memé didn't cut corners, even on the smallest parts of earrings. The piece had been beautifully shaped and was as smooth as a pearl. Plus, it was wet from the storm, so there was very little friction.

"Here we go," Glenn said.

"Ahh... Agh, mmm..."

Glenn tried again and failed again. He just couldn't get a hold of the sphere. The treatment should have been simple enough, and he wanted to finish quickly for Plum's sake. The earring had to be tickling her something awful.

"Mmm... H-haven't you got it yet?"

"I'm sorry," Glenn said. "It might take some time."

"Really?" Plum sounded as if she was about to cry. "P-please hurry..."

Glenn didn't want to rush the treatment, though he did feel bad that it was taking so long.

"Okay. I'll try."

For a vampire, perhaps a foreign object in the ear was especially unsettling.

"Err..." Glenn frowned, something that didn't happen often.

The metal sphere slipped out of the grabber, deeper into the ear. Since it was made to connect to the rest of the earring, there should have been some sort of hole, some break in its smooth surface, but Glenn couldn't see it from where he was.

"Mmmmm, agggh...ooooh."

It would be unacceptable to hurt any part of her ear, but damaging the eardrum would be catastrophic. If the drum were torn, they'd have to wait for it to heal naturally, which would take at least a month. But during that time, Plum would be in tremendous pain, and especially susceptible to the kinds of bacteria that could cause ear infections, long-term inflammation, and discharge.

He needed to remain vigilant.

“Mmm, ahh... Mmm, aggh!”

Glenn looked into the ear again, trying to come up with a good plan.

“Here we go. Mm, this is really difficult.”

He couldn't use too much force, so it was hard to make the right adjustments. It might have looked and felt as simple as cleaning out the ear, but this treatment required a much more delicate technique.

“D-Doctor...” Plum was trembling.

He wondered if she was frightened. Was she thinking about the very real possibility that he might damage her ear?

“Hold still just a little longer.”

“I-I can't. When you're...when you're this close, the smell...”

“Plum?”

“Ahhh...ahh...ahhhh!”

Plum's breathing grew heavy. Her body wasn't trembling with fear, but because she was holding back.

“The smell of blood is strong!”

“Plum, just wait a second.”

“Your blood is so delicious, Doctor!”

Now Glenn was trembling. Plum's face was flushed and she stared up at Glenn. Glenn knew that look.

“I might not be able to keep myself from attacking you...”

Glenn finally realized where he'd gone. Plum hadn't been afraid of the exam.

She'd been afraid of losing control of her blood-sucking impulses. He'd been careless.

"Plum, calm down," Glenn said, trying to keep his voice even.

"Oooh!"

She wasn't calming. He began to hear a dripping noise. It was probably Plum's drool. She spread her wings, preparing to feed.

I have no choice.

Glenn took the tool out of Plum's ear.

"Huh?"

Her eyes were euphoric. The more she fought the craving, the stronger it would grow.



“Plum, look carefully.” Glenn lifted his shirt, exposing his stomach, which was fit from all his arduous activities.

“Waaaahhh! N-no, Doctor! You can’t show me that delicious stomach!”

Plum’s eyes flashed, like those of a carnivore stalking its prey.

“It’s getting in the way of your treatment, so I want you to focus on this for a minute. Suck my blood.”

“Ahh, i-if you say so... I...can’t...control myself...” Plum flew at Glenn.

She bit into his abdomen. Even though he’d offered, the pain when she sank her teeth into his flesh still shocked him.

“Mmm! Mm...ahh, ahhh!”

Blood gushed out of the marks left by her sharp teeth. She lapped it all up with her tongue.

“Ahh, ahh, ahh! Mm, mm, slu-slurrrp!”

Plum wrapped both of her arms around Glenn’s body, pulling her face close. She wouldn’t let a single drop of blood go to waste.

There we go! That’s what I was waiting for!

Sure, it was a bit frightening to offer his stomach, one of the weakest points on the human body, to a vampire, but Plum just wanted the blood, not his meat. Although she had sharp fangs, her jaw was no different from a human’s, which meant there was little risk of her even accidentally tearing into any organs.

“Mmm! Smack, slurp, slurrrp, mmffn...”

She was completely preoccupied. With her face pressed up against his stomach, Glenn had a perfect view of the top of her head and into her ears.

I need to do it now...

Plum wasn’t paying any attention to her ear. Glenn quickly inserted the tweezers.

“Slurp, mmm! Ow, mmm! Slurp, ahhn.”

Glenn operated the grabber carefully. This was his chance to finish the treatment, while she was busy.

“Slurp, slurrrp! Ah, agh, ahn!”

“Er!”

But he still couldn’t grab the sphere. She moved as she slurped, squirming around his abdominal area, licking up every last drop of blood.

“Mmm, agh, slurp, slurrrp...”

Glenn peered into her ear. The piece of the earring had shifted, and now the hole was facing him. He just needed to clamp the grabber onto it. It should have been simple, but...

“Slurp! Mm, mmm...mmm!”

Glenn couldn’t concentrate with all the loud, persistent licking.

It’s no use. I’ve got to focus somehow.

Glenn focused every fiber of his being, shoving the sensation of Plum’s tongue into the back of his mind and concentrating on the delicate operation of the grabber.

“Mmm, ahhn!”

Just when he thought he had it, Plum shifted. Glenn yanked the tweezers out of her ear.

“P-Plum, watch out!”

“Oooh, b-but...it felt like an electric shock!”

“Really?”

“Oooh, it’s sensitive! When I want blood, my body does weird things. Mm, slurp, mm.”

Even as she said this, Plum continued to lap up Glenn’s blood. When she was like this, she had no self-control whatsoever.

Glenn tried to think, despite the feel of her tongue against his skin.

More sensitivity during blood cravings... But why?

“Mm, ach, mmm, slurp.”

Perhaps the hunger heightens her five senses?

On top of that, it was more severe when she was wounded, since sucking blood helped heal her. It only made sense that when her survival instinct was heightened, her senses sharpened, too. Wasn’t that what was happening now? Which meant Glenn needed to be even more careful removing the object from her ear.

What to do?

His plan had backfired. He’d thought she’d be distracted, not *more* sensitive!

But...I just have to do it.

Glenn mentally prepared himself, then inserted the tweezers again, taking care not to touch the sides of her ear at all.

“Ahn, mm, slu-slurp.”

It was possible that Plum didn’t even realize the tweezers were in there. If he could keep it that way, then he wouldn’t have any issues removing the earring. Glenn focused on keeping perfect control of the force in his fingers.

I can do it.

He managed to grab hold of the metal sphere.

“I...got it!” Glenn said, as he slipped the tweezers out of Plum’s ear. A small metal ball was clasped between them. He let out a sigh of relief. He’d successfully completed the treatment.

Plum, however, was oblivious, still licking Glenn’s stomach.

“Mmm...ah, smack...”

The pain in his stomach suddenly washed over him. He’d forgotten all about it while he was concentrating.

“Mmm, slurp, slurrrp...”

He looked down at Plum, her face buried in his abdomen, her rough tongue scratching at the wound. He wanted to pull her off somehow, but her arms were wrapped around him with super strength, and he couldn’t move.

“Fairies, will you call Sapphee for me?” he yelled.

“Yes, sir,” a fairy from the corner of the room answered flatly, caught off guard. “Don’t work too hard.” The fairy fluttered off.

Glenn laughed weakly at this warning.

“Why do you have to hurt yourself with every treatment, Doctor?” Sapphee demanded, fixing Glenn with her piercing gaze.

She was applying ointment to his wound.

“Uhh, sorry?”

“I know it was necessary, but the healer can’t be getting hurt all the time. Dr. Cthulhy would be angry, too.”

“I know.” Glenn couldn’t change the past. He could only reflect on what he’d done.

This was the second time he’d let Plum suck his blood in order to calm her. Last time, his mentor had admonished him. This time, it was his fiancée. If he ever treated Plum again, he’d have to think of a better way.

“Well, it seems to be superficial, so I’ll stop lecturing you. For today.”

“I’m sorry I always make more work for you, Sapphee.”

“Just don’t come crying to me if you die while treating someone!” Sapphee joked, but her eyes weren’t laughing.

Glenn couldn’t help but chuckle. It wasn’t that long ago that he’d been inside a giant’s mouth. He decided he needed to be more diligent with safety in the ever-dangerous work of treating monsters.

“Incidentally, what method did you use for that ‘treatment’ over there?”

“Oh, that?”

Glenn and Sapphee were looking at a now-dry Illy. Beside her in the waiting room sat Plum, who’d finally calmed down after sucking Glenn’s blood.

“I’m sorry.” It was Plum who offered the first apology.

“I’m sorry for, you know, everything. And...thank you for saving me.”

“O-oh.”

Plum still couldn’t look at Illy, and her words were labored, but they were a start.

“Well, I’m sorry, too. I lost my temper. I guess we both did.”

“Y-yes. Does this mean we made up?”

“I guess so?”

They both cocked their heads. Neither of them knew what actually constituted making up. Nor did they know what a healthy relationship looked like.

Well, maybe that will bring the two of them together.

Glenn smiled, and Sapphee’s face mirrored his. Lulala and Memé had been worried about these two, but in the end, everything had worked out just— “Ah, but you know I’m going to be the ambassador,” Plum said.

“Huh?” Illy looked genuinely confused at this after what she’d thought was a moment of honesty and vulnerability.

“I don’t have any intention of dropping out now,” Plum said. “The election will happen as soon as the storm passes. That’s when we’ll settle our score.”

“What did you just apologize for, then?”

“I apologized for overreacting! And I thanked you for saving me! But we still need to decide who’s going to be the ambassador to the human realm, don’t we?” Plum laid it all out matter-of-factly.

“Uh...is that so? I mean, you *did* apologize. So now we’re going to just decide who’s more popular?”

“That’s right!” Plum responded.

“In that case, I’m not going to lose! You’ll see how popular my wings are!”

The conversation was heading in a dangerous direction. Neither Plum nor Illy were threatening physical violence this time, but they were both clearly ready to battle it out in the ambassador election.

Both Sapphee and Tisalia had told them to fight wholesomely, but Glenn hadn't thought they'd actually end up doing that.

"Is the issue settled now?" Glenn asked.

Sapphee answered him with silence.

Glenn was still uneasy. Each of them was so sure they'd win. When one of them was elected, what would that do to the other?

"Well, I'm *not* going to lose! Now that we've made up, Memé's going to sell me the best accessories!"

"Ahh, Memé was so worried! You should apologize to her and Lulala!"

"You mean *both* of us should apologize!"

"Whatever! I'm not going to lose!"

"Me, neither!"

"Erggg!"

"Ugggh!"

The harpy and the vampire, both contrary by nature, were back in each other's faces, talking trash. Just then, they looked at Glenn in unison.

"What about you, Doctor?!"

"Huh?" Glenn didn't know why he was suddenly in their sights.

"Ahh, that's right! You're going to vote, right, Doctor? Who are you voting for?"

"Me, of course!" Illy exclaimed. "You said you like my wings!"

"But you were just helping me get the earring out of my ear!" Plum cut in.
"C'mon, Doctor! Vote for me and I'll dress however you want!"

"Why would he like someone who violently sucks his blood?!"

"*You're* the violent one!"

"What did you say?!"

"What did *you* say?!"

Glenn held his head in his hands. Just when it seemed like they were almost getting along, he'd become the subject of their next argument.

"Both of you, stop it this instant!" A blue vein throbbed in Sapphee's head. "If you fight in the clinic, I'll toss you out into the storm."

"S-sorry! We're good friends, we promise!"

"Y-yes! This is just...our way of communicating! So...we can still stay here tonight, yeah?"

Illy's rainbow-feathered wings joined Plum's bat-like webbed ones for an awkward embrace. They both forced smiles.

It would probably be a while before they truly got along with one another, but the fact that they could at least fake it reminded Sapphee of her and Tisalia.

"Okay, okay." Sapphee gave in. "You're welcome to use the bed until morning. But no more arguing, or I *will* put you out!"

"Okay!" they replied in unison.

"What a handful..."

Thanks to Sapphee's mediation, the two young women finally settled down.

"Now, then, Doctor, let's turn in for the night."

"Yes, let's. I'm exhausted."

"That's because you're willing to get your blood sucked as part of your patient care," Sapphee quipped.

"I can't deny it."

It was already well past midnight, and the banging of the shutters was only growing stronger.

"I hope it stops raining tomorrow," Glenn said.

All they could do was wait out the storm. Glenn went to his room, hoping he'd be able to sleep with the sound of the rain beating.

"Thank you for your help!" two voices called after him.

“Mmm, I’m still sleepy...”

It was the following day.

Glenn needn’t have worried about the storm. The skies above Lindworm were clear, but the heat had returned, just as unbearable. It would have been nice if there was a respite in between.

“I have deliveries,” Illy said, “so I’m going to go now.”

“Me, too,” Plum said. “I usually sleep during the day.”

They both flew off.

“Did they sleep next to each other last night?” Sapphee asked.

“I can’t tell if they’re friends or enemies.” Glenn chuckled.

Even their daily rhythms were completely different. Illy was headed to Scythia Transportation, while Plum was going back to the hotel for more sleep.

“I’ll write a letter to Lord Murdrac to notify him of Plum’s injury and the emergency treatment,” Sapphee said. “We’ll need to explain in detail.”

“Ah, yeah,” he agreed. “Please do.”

Lord Murdrac was a powerful figure in Lindworm. There was no telling what he might be thinking the morning after his daughter didn’t come home. While Sapphee was pondering this, Tisalia stopped by.

“Good morning!”

For some reason, a sleepy-looking Arahnia was tagging along behind her.

“Good morning.” Sapphee greeted her. “You’re always up so early.”

Tisalia’s morning run was legendary. She never went without her daily training regimen.

“I just saw Illy and Plum fly off.”

“They both were out in the storm, so we let them rest at the clinic.” Sapphee explained what had happened the night before.

“I’m sorry. Illy insisted on making deliveries up until the last minute.” Tisalia bowed her head, apologizing for her employee. But this was also further

evidence of Illy's diligent work ethic.

"So, what are you doing here?"

"Do I need a reason to come here now? How about to see my beloved fiancée's face?"

"Ergggh..."

Sapphee and Tisalia glared at each other. They were more like Illy and Plum than either would care to admit.

"Hey now, don't you two get into it!" Arahnia cut in calmly. "We had something to talk to the doc about, yeah?"

"Talk...about?"

"About the ambassador to the human realm," Arahnia said, pulling out a document from the city council. It was a ballot, a simple one with just a space to write the name of the candidate.

"The two of them might be getting along now, but once one of them is elected, they could start up their feud again. So we had an idea, yeah?"

"An idea?" Glenn looked at them, puzzled.

"Are you talking about forging ballots?" Sapphee asked. "The council members aren't so easily fooled."

Most of them were wolf-type hybrid monsters. This had been done deliberately to prevent forgery. The hybrids had superior olfactory senses, and it was said they could tell the species, sex, and age of the writer just by smelling documents. There were also specially trained forgery officers who oversaw all elections.

"No, no," Arahnia said. "Not forgery. But—"

"Could you just let the young women's guardians consult for a moment?" Tisalia finished for her. "I don't think that's asking too much."

"Huh?" Glenn didn't understand.

"It wasn't something I wanted, but caring for Plum has been pushed onto me. I feel responsible for her." Arahnia cackled. For some reason, evil plans always

excited her. "How about Tisalia and I fix it so the girls can get along, yeah?"

"Exactly!" Tisalia stuck out her chest proudly.

Sapphee and Glenn looked at each other, not at all understanding what these two guardians had in mind.

Epilogue: The Name of the Unannounced Guest

A FEW DAYS HAD PASSED since the election for ambassador to the human realm. A noisy guest was visiting the clinic.

“Brother!” Sioux called. Glenn’s little sister’s voice was always ten times louder than his own.

She often visited the clinic while she was out on patrol, but she’d stopped by for a different reason today. That she’d chosen lunchtime, when there wouldn’t be other patients around, and yelled through the waiting room, were both hallmarks of Sioux’s strange, serious personality.

“Brother! Brother! I beg your pardon!” Sioux was sweating from her forehead.

“Welcome, Sioux.” Glenn greeted her.

Now that the storm had passed, there was no sign of Lindworm cooling off anytime soon. Sioux was especially susceptible to the heat, and immediately started gulping down the lemon water available to patients in the waiting room.

“Mmm, ahhhh!” She smacked her lips. “Lemon water is the best in the summer!”

“Believe it or not, it’s still spring,” Glenn reminded her.

The abnormal weather was affecting everyone in town. On the plantation, the heat had caused an abundant overgrowth of weeds, and they were looking for temporary workers to remove them. The fact that Aluloona saw this potential crisis as an opportunity to create jobs was a testament to her business acumen.

“Are you patrolling today?” Glenn asked Sioux.

“Ahh, no! I am not! I was just notified by the city council about who will accompany me to the human realm!”

“So the voting is finished, then?”

The ambassador had been decided. Sioux must have been anxious to learn

which young lady would be joining her on the long journey east.

“It will be...two people!”

“Huh?”

“Miss Illy, of the harpies, and Miss Plum, the vampire. They received an equal number of votes, so they *both* shall be appointed!”

“I see.” Glenn nodded approvingly. “So that’s how it worked out.”

It must have been too difficult for the residents of Lindworm to choose between them. The good news was that if the incompatible duo received the exact same number of votes, it wouldn’t cause a fight. Plus, although both of them had recently been treated by Glenn, they were completely healthy now. Neither had any ailments that would prevent them from making a long journey.

“I am staring at you, Brother.”

“What is it, Sioux?”

His sister narrowed her eyes. Glenn wondered if she noticed him trying to avert his own gaze.

“You are hiding something.”

“Hiding what?”

“Brother! You plotted this, did you not?! It is nearly impossible for a referendum to end in a precisely equal number of votes!”

“That’s true, but there was nothing I could have done to manipulate it.” Glenn was just the town doctor, after all.

But Sioux didn’t accept this answer. She shook her head furiously. “No! Brother, you are friendly with the women of this town! The city council representative, her bodyguard, the plantation owner, the president of the hospital, the Lady of transportation, the manager of the graveyard district, et cetera, et cetera. Sioux is sure you have other connections Sioux doesn’t know about, which you could use to manipulate—”

“I haven’t done anything of the sort!”

“In other words, you admit that something was done!” Sioux drew closer.

Her questioning was fierce. No wonder she made such a great addition to the patrol team.

Glenn held up his hands. "Tisalia and Arahnia made...arrangements."

"Arrangements?" Sioux repeated.

"Scythia Transportation was always going to back Illy, since she's their employee," he explained. "So they coordinated with Loose Silk Sewing to ensure that the number of votes would be the same. Apparently, all the arachnes at the sewing factory like Plum, since she comes to buy clothes there so often."

Tisalia and Arahnia had done what they could to rig the voting, but in the end, it looked like Plum wouldn't have quite enough votes, so Glenn had written her name on his ballot. Since this wasn't a typical political election, and since Tisalia and Arahnia both had such extensive information networks, the whole thing had been rather simple.

"B-but even so, that would not make the votes precisely equal! There is a limit to how many people the two of them can mobilize!"

"Well, you see..." Glenn smiled. "In the end, it turned out that Plum and Illy were equally popular."

"Ahh...I see."

It had actually been a coincidence that they'd ended up with the same number of votes. Arahnia and Tisalia's scheming had been a factor, but not the deciding one. According to Arahnia, when Lord Murdrac heard that Illy had saved Plum, he withdrew his formal opposition of her bid for the office of ambassador. Apparently, he now thought very highly of her.

"Take care of them, Sioux. Especially Illy. She's had bad experiences with humans. Show them around. Teach them the *good* things about the human realm."

"Roger that!" she saluted. "Sioux was not able to speak with them at length, but Sioux will take this as an opportunity to grow closer to both of them!"

Glenn's sister innocently believed that there was no one in the world she

couldn't get along with. As long as Sioux was there, Illy and Plum could surely set their differences aside.

Actually...

Maybe I should have asked Sioux to mediate from the beginning...

If Sioux had been there, perhaps the whole thing would have been resolved in an instant. Or perhaps that was just Glenn's bias.

"Thank you," he replied.

"Leave it to Sioux!" she affirmed. Sioux was never timid when it came to human relationships. "Incidentally, Brother, I don't see Sister."

"Yeah. She's out right now."

"Out where?" Sioux asked casually.

"Here and there. She's busy with wedding preparations."

"Wedding!" Sioux's eyes grew wide at the word. "Is that right? Soon, Brother will be married! You've waited so long, but you finally have Mother and Father's permission."

"It's not all *that* dramatic." Glenn thought she was going a little overboard.

Sioux's eyes went wide.

"What are you saying?! Marriage is the most important thing! Especially the marriage between Brother and Sister Sapphee, for which I, too, have been waiting! It must be a grand celebration! Wait, Brother, why are you not accompanying Sister in the preparations?!"

Glenn scratched his head. "She told me not to come."

Sapphee seemed to want to take charge of the ceremony so that Glenn could concentrate on work.

"Right. Well, that happens." Sioux's temperament was so changeable. She also placed a high value on Sapphee's feelings. "Has the date been set?"

"Not yet," Glenn said. "It's hard to schedule."

"Sioux will be departing for the human realm next week. Memé has arranged

a carriage and Lulala will be serenading us! Depending on my duties, I may not return in time for the ceremony.”

“That’s true,” Glenn agreed.

The journey to the human realm would be long. The plan was for Souen to guide them through the territories once they arrived. But of course, plans could change. No matter what happened, Glenn knew everything would be all right so long as his martial arts master sister was in charge. Still, it saddened him to think that she might not be able to attend the wedding. She would certainly be the happiest one there. However, it couldn’t be helped.

“What if we throw a special reception after you come back?”

“Ah! I shall look forward to it! Now, Sioux must return to work!”

In addition to her normal patrol team duties, she also needed to prepare for her trip. But as busy as she was, he was glad to see her so happy.

“Have a safe trip,” he said.

“I shall enjoy my duties as ambassador without letting my guard down in the familiar east!”

Sioux bowed deeply, then hurried out of the clinic.

Everyone, not just Sioux, seemed busy these days, but that was to be expected. Living meant being busy.

“Be careful of the heat!” Glenn called after her.

Demons were especially susceptible to heat exhaustion, and there was no sign of the weather cooling off anytime soon.

The Draconess

THAT SAME DAY, Kunai visited Skadi's office.

Skadi sat in her representative's chair, tail swinging back and forth as she read a scroll from the east.

"I brought the shaved ice you requested," Kunai said.

"Hurrah!" Though Skadi's expression hadn't changed, her tail swung a bit harder. The day was especially hot, so she wanted to eat something cold.

"There is also a report from the staff. There was evidence of fraud in the election for ambassador to the human realm. Someone rigged the votes."

"Miss Tisalia and Miss Arahnia, right? It doesn't matter. Both Illy and Plum were selected, and no one has a problem with that." Skadi was still staring at the scroll. "Actually, I wanted to be the ambassador."

"Don't be selfish. If the Draconess were to run, it wouldn't even be an election. Besides, who would be in charge while you were gone?"

"Ah, mm," Skadi mumbled as she ate the shaved ice with a spoon.

She seemed fatigued, and even less motivated than usual. The excessive heat drained her energy.

"What are you reading?" Kunai asked.

"Souen sent it to me. It's a scroll about your creation," Skadi said casually. "It was found in the Black Widows' storage."

"You found it?!" Kunai exclaimed.

The Black Widows were a cult group related to Arahnia. They'd been collecting rare items from all over, including what Skadi suspected might be the notes of the doctor who'd made Kunai. Souen had investigated, and he'd finally found them. There were many mysteries surrounding Kunai's production, and even her current master, Skadi, didn't know all the details.

"I'm sorry you went to such trouble, Draconess."

“No, no,” Skadi waved her hand dismissively. “Naturally I want to know more about you. But I was also interested in something else.”

“Something...else?” Kunai asked.

“I told you, remember? The first-generation Molly came back during the harvest festival.”

“Oh, yeah...” Kunai nodded.

Word was that when the harvest festival had finished, the spirit of the first-generation Molly, who was supposed to have passed already, had borrowed the second-generation Molly’s body. It had only been for a short time, but for Skadi, it was a chance to meet a friend she’d thought she’d never see again. However, the first-generation Molly had also given her a warning.

“She said...to be careful because something would happen to Dr. Glenn?” Kunai recalled.

“Right,” Skadi confirmed.

“That could mean anything, though.” Kunai looked down.

“I don’t know any more than you,” Skadi said calmly. “But since she went out of her way to warn me, I thought I should prepare.”

“That’s a wonderful attitude,” Kunai said. “But what does it have to do with my production plans?”

“It was a warning from the first-generation Molly, so I thought maybe it had to do with someone who’s already dead.”

Skadi had a sharp eye. She often kidded around, but when she was serious about something, she displayed the dignity of the Draconess who controlled the council.

“I consulted Draconia, who’s well versed in sorcery, but she said they can’t tell anything from just a warning. Also, she doesn’t know much about sorcery used by the dead.”

Kunai knew the name Draconia. She was an alligator-type monster who taught sorcery at the Academy.

"Necromancy is a taboo subject among sorcerers. Draconia is very knowledgeable, but she said she wouldn't even know where to begin."

"So...my production plans?" Kunai was finally starting to understand.

"Right."

There was a possibility that the doctor who'd made Kunai had mastered this taboo craft. Skadi was trying to gain insight into Molly's warning through those notes.

"But I still have no idea. I learned a lot about you, Kunai, but nothing about the dead. In the end you're just a golem made from dead materials."

"Right," Kunai agreed. "It's not as if I'm a dead person who was brought back to life."

"Yeah." Skadi sighed.

Resurrection of the dead was different from creating a flesh golem, and also different from a dead person walking around as a zombie. There were many undead monsters, but she'd never heard of a dead being coming back to life anywhere. If that could happen, then they wouldn't need doctors.

"Maybe the warning wasn't about a dead person after all?" Skadi rubbed her eyes. None of it made sense.

"You are so kind, Draconess, to go to all this trouble just for Dr. Glenn," Kunai said. "It is proof that you care for each and every one of the residents in town."

"That's not it." Skadi shook her head. "If Molly went out of her way to come back and give me that warning...it might mean that something über terrible is coming. Something that will affect the entire town."

"Über terrible?" Kunai couldn't help but repeat this unfamiliar phrase.

"Yeah, über terrible," Skadi said again.

"You mean...like the storm that came the other day?"

"I wonder. Maybe not. I get the feeling that it's more like the sleeping disease, or the poisoned water incident...or maybe even something bigger." Skadi looked off into the distance. "Hopefully I'm wrong."

“The patrol team and I will be on the alert,” Kunai assured her. “Ready for anything.”

“Thank you,” Skadi said, but she looked no less concerned. “I suppose all disasters are sudden. Can any of us truly prepare?”

Kunai was silent.

They’d been able to prepare for the storm because the mermaids had warned them. Couldn’t they do the same if they took the warning from first-generation Molly seriously? Then again, predicting was one thing. Preparing was another matter entirely.

“Hopefully nothing happens,” the gentle dragon prayed, her eyes returning to the scroll.

The depths of her concern were evidenced by the fact that her icy treat now lay melting, abandoned.

Sioux, Illy, and Plum departed Lindworm without incident.

The entire town came out to see them off. When Tisalia said goodbye to Illy, there were tears in her eyes, as if her own child were leaving. The two of them had been through a lot, but Glenn knew that they both would be all right.

“Phew...”

That day, the sun was as hot as midsummer again. Spring was almost over, the heat was as unbearable as ever.

Sapphee was running all over the place to prepare for the wedding. She knew exactly what she wanted for their special day, and Glenn figured he’d leave the planning to her. His only regret was that it looked more and more likely they’d be married while Sioux was away.

“Marriage.”

It didn’t feel real. But thinking about spending the rest of his life with the woman he’d always admired put Glenn in high spirits. He only hoped he could make her half as happy as she made him.

He and Sapphee had overcome so many difficulties together. Now they would face the future as husband and wife.

I'm sure it will be fine.

Glenn truly believed that.

Even so...

"There aren't many people here today."

The normally full clinic was all but empty. It was strange. Glenn tried to remember if there was a specific moment when it had slowed. In the morning? The afternoon?

"Wait..."

What time was it right now?

It hurt his head to think about it. What had he just been doing? He'd thought he was working, but he couldn't remember. He felt dazed, as if there was a fog closing in on him from all directions.

What was happening?

When he came to, the fairies were gone. He couldn't hear any noise from the busy road. An unsettling silence surrounded him, accompanied by suffocating heat, which seemed to cloud his thinking even more.

"Er..."

As he tried to collect his wits, the clinic bell rang.

"Yes!" Glenn answered, feeling relieved that a patient had arrived, as if things were normal.

But when he got to the waiting room, a woman in a nun outfit was standing there. He only knew one person who dressed like that.

"Miss...Molly?"

She looked a lot like Molly Vanitas, manager of the graveyard district, but her appearance was different. Her upper body was clad in what looked like armor, and there was a deep slit in her skirt. Her shoes boasted sparkling wings. Glenn had never seen Molly wear clothes like these.

Most striking of all, this person's head wasn't connected to her body. It was tucked under her arm.

"Er!"

The eyes of the head were closed. Glenn couldn't tell if she was alive or dead...or even what this being was.

Headless... Could she be a dullahan?!

He recalled an extremely rare species from the far west. They were thought to be related to fairies, but there was very little documented about them. Glenn had never come across one, so he couldn't even be sure this *was* a dullahan.

A fluorescent flame flickered above her neck where the head should have been. Upon closer inspection, the flame formed butterfly shapes that flew off as soon as they were far enough from her body. In the east, butterflies were said to be spirits of the dead.

And according to legend, the dullahan appeared in front of people who were about to die.

"Err..."

Glenn couldn't move. He felt like he was chained in place.

She took a step forward.

"Uh?!"

Goosebumps prickled Glenn's entire body. He couldn't flee, and his brain was still hazy from the heat. He knew he should do something, but there was nothing he *could* do except watch as this creature moved closer to him.

The headless nun stabbed Glenn in the chest with a shovel-shaped spear she held in her hand.

"Umph!"



Ahh! I'm going to die!

With this final thought, Glenn plunged into darkness. The creature in front of him—the headless woman who looked like Molly—betrayed no emotion as she looked down on Glenn.

“Ah!”

He tried to call Sapphee’s name one last time, but only a gasp came out.

Sapphee would return to the clinic soon to find Glenn without a heartbeat. And it would be less than a day before the news that Glenn had died spread throughout the town.

Afterword

HELLO EVERYONE, Yoshino Origuchi here.

The anime broadcast has finished, and things have NOT settled down. Well, you know.

The anime takes a lot of work, so I had to concentrate on only that for a while. I feel like I always need to be working on something.

Things have been tough with COVID-19, but I'm hoping to push through it.

First of all, let me talk about the anime.

I want to thank everyone who watched it, the staff who produced it, and the cast from the bottom of my heart. Making an anime was a dream of mine as a light novel author, and I think we did a great job on it.

I was impressed at how many people it took just to complete one season.

I'm really grateful that such a niche work could become an anime.

Now, about Volume 9.

The young group really is a mess.

I had to research echolocation to use it in the story, and the more I researched it, the more surprised I was at how interesting bats are and how powerful their sense of hearing is. Nature and living beings really are amazing.

The preen oil of birds was also impressive. I had no idea there was a hole that secreted oil, and I thought, "I can definitely make this a sexy healthy treatment scene!" I still have a lot to learn about the biology of living beings.

Of course, something terrible happens at the end.

The reason for this is that I wanted there to be a dullahan girl. You'll have to wait until the next volume to see what happens to Glenn.

I would now like to express my gratitude.

To my editor, Hibiu-san, who is always watching over me: Thank you for everything. All my author friends love the Korean barbecue restaurant you took me to.

To Z-ton, my illustrator: Thank you for the healthy image of Illy this time. I think you've gotten even better at drawing light.

To Thomas Kanemaki from Comicalize, and Mitsuhiro Kimura at Zero Comicalize: Thank you both for taking such good care of me. Thank you for everything.

Also, thank you to all of the artists who talk to me. I'm specifically talking about the manga artists and illustrators on Twitter, et cetera, as well as S-BOW, the owner of Jingai Only, and the entire staff.

Also, thank you to everyone working at bookstores throughout the country. Thank you to the *Comic Ryu* reps and editorial staff, and the staff at Zero Comicalize. You're like family that I can't meet in person because of COVID. Thank you to the proofreaders who find every teeny tiny mistake.

And to all of you readers, I am forever grateful.

The next book is Volume 10.

Also, it's the last one! I can't believe it's ending!

I want to give it a spectacular finale. Once it's over, of course, there's something else waiting.

I'm working hard on preparing that now. At this point, it still only exists in my head!

I-I'll do my best to write something good, so just give me a little time.

Thank you, thank you,

Yoshino Origuchi

About the Author, Yoshino Origuchi Origuchi here. I always seem to be working, even after the anime settled down.

Of course, it's good to have work to do.

But if I work too hard, I'll end up like Glenn, so I'm trying to take some time off.

About the Illustrator, Z-ton

Who thought there would be new costumes so late in the series?!

It was perfect timing, because I'd been wanting to give Sapphee a new look.

It's a bit off-topic, but when clothes were ripped in the work, I thought, "Oh, no! It's going to be impossible to fix!" Maybe that's the parent in me? Well, but I'll tear it anyway...



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