

A movie poster for the short story 'Gift of Glass' featuring Kay L Moody. The central figure is a woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a purple strapless corset and a black tulle skirt. She is adorned with a red beaded necklace and has her arms raised in a dramatic pose. The background is a dark, atmospheric scene with a purple and blue sky, a horizon line, and a body of water with a small boat. Numerous shards of broken glass are scattered throughout the scene, some appearing to float in the air. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

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A short story by Kay L Moody

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GIFT OF GLASS

Lyra nearly tripped over her dress as a burning sensation gripped her forearm. The pain spread out like the stinging tentacles of a jellyfish, taking care to buzz through every pore as it traveled.

They said she'd get used to it, but they were wrong. The pain blinded her just as thoroughly as it had the first time she felt it. Five years ago.

She burst through the doors of the cold and empty laboratory. She wasn't supposed to be here without a scientist, but they always took too long asking her questions and recording things. She needed pain relief and she needed it now.

She squeezed her fist as she barreled past a steel desktop. As she squeezed, she heard a pop and turned to the security camera with a grimace. Sure enough, the lens had cracked and shattered. Third lens that week.

She collapsed against a cabinet as she fished through the curls bundled on top of her head. Her breaths came out in shallow bursts as she willed the twisting tentacles to stop cutting through her arm.

At last, she found the tiny screwdriver hidden in her hair and used it to pick the lock on the cabinet. She begged the pain to release its grip for just one second, but of course it didn't. Instead, she had to work through the pain.

When she finally managed to release the lock, she tucked the tiny screwdriver back in her hair and threw open the cabinet. Vials of all shapes and sizes stared back at her, mocking her pain.

Which one? Which one would do it this time? The short squat vial of fluorescent violet goo only helped when her toes locked up. The thin vial holding a milky white liquid swirled with hints of butterscotch yellow helped when the pain felt like knives.

Maybe the silver gaseous substance in the round vial with a cork in the top? She hadn't tried that one yet. At the last second, she chose a familiar pear green liquid in a beaker that almost looked like a cup. Close enough that she could pretend, at least for one stupid second, she could pretend that something about her life was normal.

She swallowed two gulps and the stinging tentacles in her arm stopped twisting. But they didn't stop

reaching. The pear green liquid merely acted as a pain reliever, but it never stopped the pain completely.

A vial filled with robin's egg blue gum drops caught her attention. Those were new.

She popped one into her mouth, hoping for some release. None came.

But the pear green liquid was doing its job. The stinging tentacles of pain had transformed to a light throbbing. It still hurt, but after years of knowing excruciating pain, this was nothing. For the first time since she entered the laboratory, she noticed a quiet snuffle.

Her head shot up as she turned and gripped the cabinet behind her. If one of the scientists found her in here, she'd be punished for weeks.

When she located the source of the sniffing, her arms relaxed and a whole new emotion swept through her. In the corner of the laboratory, a boy crouched over a heat lamp, sniffing and wiping his nose with his shirt sleeve. His soft, honey-colored hair clung to his forehead as drips of sweat trailed down his cheeks.

The boy was still in his gray compound uniform. Why wasn't he at the party with everyone else? He looked so fragile crouching there with his knees up to his chest. He looked terrified. No doubt his parents were looking for him and they were probably worried sick.

Clearing her throat, she stepped toward him. When he looked up, her salutation lost its way somewhere between her throat and her lips.

This was no boy.

Well, a boy, but not a young boy who needed his parents to come rescue him. The way he crouched and sniffled made him look so tiny, but he wasn't young. Just vulnerable. He was a peer and she had caught him in a moment he surely didn't want to share.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Mm," he said with a crooked nod. His eyes fell back to the heat lamp. It shined on the cement floor, but she noticed now that a small green body with a black and yellow tail slumped on the cement in the middle of the light's shine.

"Is that a lizard?" she asked.

"*Shhh!*"

Her head reeled at the sound he made. She had been trained long ago to react to certain noises and the *sh* sounds were always the worst. She dug her nails into the folds of her crinoline party dress. Her teeth gritted together as a sharp crack burst from a nearby window. When she opened her eyes, she saw a spider web of cracks still stretching through the glass in front of her.

Right on cue, an icy spider web of pain sliced through her shin bone.

The red rimming the boy's eyelids acted like a picture frame around his wide eyes. For one small moment, he seemed to have forgotten the heat lamp.

"You have the gift," he said in a hush.

Her knees buckled, making them land squarely on the unforgiving cement floor. She swallowed the bile trying to force its way up her throat. Clutching her stomach, she said, "The only people who call it a gift are the ones who don't have it."

Through the top of her eyelashes, she saw him staring at her. The black badge over his chest had his name stitched in silver thread. Declan. For a moment, his eyes drooped, and it looked as though he were about to reach out to her.

But then, his head snapped back toward the lizard and his face hardened like a jagged knife. "Figures you'd be just like the rest of them."

He wrapped an arm over his elbow, pulling it tight toward him as he started gently rocking his body back and forth. "Oh, woe is me," he said in a mocking tone. "I can crack and shatter glass. I can even make sand turn into glass. The only thing I can't do is make glass levitate. But it's horrible because I feel a slight headache every time I use the gift."

If it weren't for the icy webs of pain cutting through her shin bones, she would have slapped him right in the face. Hard.

Heaving, she forced herself off the ground and stumbled back to the cabinet. At least this time, she knew what vial she needed. She searched for the rectangular vial filled with a salmon pink substance as thick as butter. She'd have to use her finger to scoop it out. Maisie would complain about proper sanitation, but she'd just have to get over it.

As Lyra searched for the vial, Declan continued to rant. "We're all here because of you guys. Couldn't they just take the kids with the gift? No, they had to take our whole families. They had to force us to live in this sterile compound with stupid laboratories and a miniscule garden. You were supposed to be able to levitate glass by now and we were supposed to be able to go home. But no, it's been five years and none of us can leave. This is your fault, you know? Have you ever thought about that?"

She pressed the salmon substance through her lips and heaved a sigh as it trailed down her throat. Relief would come soon, but only for the pain in her legs. She still had to find the right vial for the pain her forearm. The pain that had sent her here in the first place.

Declan's voice had changed somewhere during his rant. Now it sounded stretched and thin, as if working hard to hold back tears. The tears were winning. "I'm almost eighteen, but nobody cares about me because I don't have the gift. Does it matter that I'm almost an

adult? No. I still have to stay here, maybe forever. Nobody cares what I want.”

The vials clinked together as Lyra moved her hands through them, searching for the one that would help with the pain in her forearm. She tried to ignore Declan and his endless rant. When he first started talking, her rush of anger had only been slightly less prominent than the web of pain. She’d never been so determined to inflict pain on someone.

But the longer he talked, the more obvious it became that he wasn’t complaining about her at all. In fact, he seemed to have forgotten she was there.

Uncorking the round vial, she sucked in a whiff of the silver gas. The pain in her forearm evaporated and she could breathe like normal again. She stuffed the cork back on the vial and closed the cabinet. With only a slight hesitation, she glanced back over at the boy.

He sat cross-legged, leaning over his feet as he rambled. His words had lost so much volume that now he merely muttered under his breath until he stopped completely midsentence. His lips parted as he gingerly poked the lizard under the heat lamp.

“Is it dead?” she asked.

His spine stiffened to a rod as he jerked his head toward her. A small tear slid down the side of his nose. He blinked at her as the muscles in his face tensed. All at once, his shoulders heaved as he shoved his palms

over his eyes. "I don't know." A breath shuddered through him that sounded vaguely like a sob.

He gulped and turned his body away from her, as if that might recover some of his dignity. When a sob escaped through his mouth, he pressed a hand over his lips. And now his shoulders bunched up around his ears as if he was trying to hold his breath. None of that did anything to hide the tears dripping from the corner of his eyes.

He was crying, *actually crying*, over a lizard. This boy, almost eighteen by his own admission, had quiet tears dripping off his chin. Though he was obviously embarrassed about it, he couldn't care enough to stop.

Her anger seemed to have evaporated along with her pain.

She sat down by him, pulling her knees up to her chin. "The families of employees are allowed to leave, but you aren't. That means someone in your family must have the gift."

He nodded as he slid a hand into his honey-colored hair. It looked shiny this close up. He played with a chunk of hair on the side of his head which perfectly obscured his eyes from hers. "My sister," he whispered.

"Is she older or younger than you?"

"She's..." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. He curled his hand to further cover his face and said, "She's dead. She died in the last round of

treatment." He barred his teeth, biting over that last word. Everyone knew the treatments were a joke. It was just a nicer way of saying *science experiment*.

He rubbed his eyes, then dropped his hands into his lap. "I wasn't this bitter before she died. I was proud of her. My little sister was going to be one of the first, real-life superheroes. The king's scientists were supposed to give her a superpower. But now it's been five years and they've done nothing but kill her and hurt the rest of you. I hate this compound and now my pet lizard is probably dead and the only thing I can do is nothing."

"What's his name?" Lyra asked, nodding toward the lizard.

"Her name is Lizzy. And yes, I know how stupid that sounds. Lizzy the lizard. In my defense, I named her when I was seven so I can't really be held accountable."

She wanted to laugh, but he spoke so genuinely, she couldn't. Especially when his eyes started brimming with tears again. "What happened?" she asked.

He pulled a tissue from his pocket and blew into it twice before he spoke again. "My parents keep forgetting things. I know they're just sad about my sister. They say grief changes you." He rubbed his nose again until the skin around his nostrils had been rubbed raw. "My dad cleaned Lizzy's cage for me because I had a school project. Except he forgot to turn her heat lamp

back on when he finished. She went too long without it and..."

His voice cut off and he buried his head in his hands. It seemed strange that she could look at him without snickering. He was almost an adult, and he was crying over a lizard. But something in his posture chased the laughter away. He was just *so* sad.

"I'm really sorry." She stared at the cement floor of the lab, trying to ignore the chill coming out from it.

He gave her a sideways glance and asked, "Why are you being so nice to me?" As soon as the words left his lips, his face fell with a grimace. "Oh no. I know why. It's because I'm pathetic. Stupid loser crying over a lizard and you can't help but pity me."

She didn't answer as he looked down. The skin around his eyes was red and puffy, obscuring what was probably a nice face on regular occasions. He turned his head to another angle, giving her a closer look at his irises. They were a dark cerulean, but with small splatters of gunmetal gray dotting through the blue. The whole effect looked like a pond at midnight with starlight reflecting off the surface.

He ran a hand through his honey hair until the shiny strands hung at messy angles all across his forehead. "Level with me," he said. "How pathetic do I look right now?" He screwed his mouth up to a knot as if bracing himself for her words.

She tapped her chin while trying to smother the smirk that lay beneath her lips. "On a scale from one to ten?" She narrowed her eyes and leaned in as if inspecting his face. With a nod, she said, "I was going to say six, except your nose is all red from crying, so that puts you at a solid seven."

"Seven?" he said as heat flushed into his cheeks. He ran a hand down the side of his face. "Well, jeez, at least you're honest."

She snickered. He didn't join in, but it seemed like he thought about smiling. Just for a moment.

After that, they were both quiet for a long time. He poked Lizzy again, but his face fell as he did, light seeming to drain right out of him.

Lyra stared at her hands as she spoke again. Her voice was so quiet, it felt like a mouse trying to talk to a lion. "Sometimes we can't change the things that happen to us. Sometimes all we can do is find something that makes us happy."

"Oh please," Declan said, already rolling his eyes. "Do not give me some inspirational speech right now or I swear I'll tell Lizzy's ghost to haunt you. I already know this speech by heart."

He sat up straighter and put his hand over his heart as he spoke in a snooty tone, "At least we have our family. At least we have food to eat. At least we have..."

He pretended to wipe a tear. "Hope." He gagged and went back to slouching. "Is that what you have? Hope?"

"No, but I have some chocolate."

He blinked at her exactly four times before he got his mouth open again. "What?" was all he managed to say.

"Chocolate always makes *me* feel better. Plus, I stole it from the worst scientist in this entire compound, so that makes it taste sweeter."

He blinked at her again.

She ignored him and pulled two small chocolate bars from the tight curls bundled on top of her head. "Do you want some?" she asked, handing him one of the bars.

"Sure," he said, letting the syllable drag out. He looked from her hair to her hand and said, "But only if I get to ask why you were keeping it in your hair."

A grin twitched at the side of her mouth. She tried to give an aloof shrug as if it wasn't the biggest accomplishment in her life. "When they pat us down before and after treatment sessions, they never think to check the hair."

He let out a tiny chuckle as he tore the wrapping off the chocolate bar. Once he stuffed a piece in his mouth, he said, "So, you stole this from one of the scientists, huh?"

Her whole body tensed at the mention of Ashwood. Even though he hadn't said her name, the thought of her

always put a shiver through her spine. Lyra clenched a small fist and said, "Trust me, she deserved it. She has these stupid fake nails that are way too long, and I swear she likes it when we're in pain."

He narrowed his eyes. "Fake nails that are super long? It's not Ashwood, is it?"

"Yes," she said with an eager nod.

"Oh man! I hate her. She banned me from the rec room once for being *too rowdy*." He rolled his eyes. "In the *recreation* room."

She nodded so hard she could feel her curls bounce against her ears. "I know! All the parents love her and even my best friend, Maisie, says she's the best, but she's so mean to me. Every time I make progress with the gift, she always gets angry."

Declan went off on a tirade about how Ashwood hated his sister and how she has it out for anyone who is good at the gift. She heard his words, but the specifics didn't matter to her. All she could think was *Finally, somebody understands*.

His hair shook each time he made a particularly strong point. It got messier the more he talked, but the messier it was, the better it looked. And the honey color would have paired so well with his cerulean and gray eyes. If they weren't puffy and red. He also had a strong jaw and impossibly straight teeth.

She didn't realize she was staring until he looked down and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry about everything I said before," he said. "I know the gift hurts worse than a headache. And it's not your fault that we're here."

A weight went through her until her body felt heavier than a house. He was wrong about that. It wasn't her fault that he was here, but it *was* her fault that she was. That thought always made her angry. Angry enough to use the gift.

Without the scientists around, maybe she could finally figure out how to snap a piece of glass clean in half. She was close, but the scientists always seemed to halt her progress with too many questions and research. Without them here to bother her, maybe she could finally do what she came here to do.

She sprang to her feet and tripped over her gown as she headed for the store cupboard on the other side of the room. She gathered a handful of the crinoline fabric to keep it out of her way as she marched.

"What are you doing?" Declan said from behind her.

She pulled a glass pane from the store cupboard and set it on the steel table. "Practicing," she said. She first took the stance she had been taught, but it was all wrong and she knew it. Instead, she finally stood the way she had always wanted.

Rather than stand like a soldier with feet shoulder width apart and her hands jammed into her sides, she relaxed. She stood with one foot in front of the other as if starting the first step in a dance. With one arm behind her like a ballerina, she held the other directly over the glass pane.

And now, instead of staring at the glass pane as if it was some terrible thing that had wronged her, she closed her eyes. She didn't focus, didn't concentrate, didn't harden. She just let the gift flow through her, gently prodding it onward, politely asking it to do what she desired.

Every bit of resistance felt like it had been swept away. Her veins tingled as a pleasant warmth spread down her arm into the fingertips of the hand just over the pane of glass.

A loud crack sounded through the room and even with her eyes closed, she knew she had done it.

"That's incredible," Declan said. "I've never seen such a clean crack."

Her eyes fluttered open just as the pain began, but she welcomed it now. This pain meant progress. That thought quickly vanished as the new pain shook and tore through her. She let out a breath as if she'd been punched in the gut. White light blinded her as the pain took hold of her senses.

She fell to the ground in a pile of fabric and bones. Her body shook with seizure-like jerks. She dreamed of the vials in the cabinet, but they might as well have been on the other side of the world for how much good they could do her. She couldn't get to them in this state.

Her shoulders suddenly burned as drips of pain cut through her shoulder blades.

"Hey!" Declan said. She had forgotten he was there. He shook her shoulders again and she realized he was trying to get her attention. Something about his voice made her force her eyes toward him. Even then, she didn't see him. The pain was too great.

He squeezed her shoulders in a surprisingly tender way and whispered, "This is what happened to my sister right before she died. Her body shook just like this, her veins were popped out and throbbing."

He held her even tighter than before. "I don't know what to do. They had some medicine that helped, but they gave it to her too late. I know she would have lived if she got it in time. But I don't know where it is."

She felt his body tense, each of his words growing hard in fear. Glass shards seemed to swim through her blood, cutting up every bit of flesh inside her. She summoned any strength she had left and used it to lift her hand. She pointed toward the cupboard in the corner, somehow knowing that was the one.

Declan's footsteps sounded like an echo as he ran. The pain still gripped her too hard to be aware of anything else. She clenched her jaw, but it did no good. It hurt more than anything she had ever experienced. She felt her stomach contract as nausea swept through her.

She regretted it now. She never should have practiced without the scientists there to help. But it didn't take away her suspicion that they were holding her back on purpose. But why?

A rough hand propped her head up as something cool pressed against her lips. She vaguely heard Declan telling her to drink, but it wasn't until he tipped the liquid into her mouth that she realized what to do. Her brain still didn't understand. It was too focused on the pain. But the muscle memory of her throat made her swallow the drink.

At first, the liquid only agitated her stomach, making her it churn and sputter. She started gagging, feeling the bile travel up her throat, but then it would go down again. Threads and tentacles and knives of pain cut through every part of her body, sparing neither organ nor muscle.

She took in a deep breath and finally, the pain began to dull. It still ached and pounded, but it didn't scream. It didn't murder. Her body felt weak as she forced herself to her feet.

"Did it work?" Declan asked as he leaned toward her.

She nodded and soon his arms were around her, pulling her tight in a hug. "I was so scared. You were shaking so hard and your veins were popping out. I thought you were going to die."

Just as he pulled her tighter, he dropped his arms and took a step back. He swallowed and tugged at the gray collar of his compound uniform. "Sorry," he said. "You don't even know me, I shouldn't have..."

She looked into his eyes, which seemed even puffier than before. Her eyes probably matched them now. Her chin quivered as she said, "It still hurts."

Without another word, he understood. He pulled her back into his arms and squeezed tight. His sister must have been the same as her because he knew just how much pressure to use and also managed to avoid hurting her shoulders.

Little by little, the pain unraveled until it was nothing more than an aching throb, relentless, but manageable.

Declan pulled away and fresh tears puddled in eyes. Lyra had a feeling that these tears had nothing to do with his lizard and everything to do with his sister. "They had this medicine the whole time," he said in raspy voice. "She could have lived, but they hid it away and killed her."

Lyra turned to the steel table and saw a cylinder vial filled with a neon pink liquid, pulsing with a blue glow. "Sometimes we can't change the things that happen to us. All we can do is find happiness while we wait." She lifted the vial and shook it in a small circle until the liquid inside swirled around. "But I think that time is over now. We know about this medicine and we know it will help others who have the gift. I think now it's time to act."

He kept his eyes on the vial as the glowing liquid swirled around. His face pulsed as if he was both excited and terrified by her words.

Whether he wanted to help or not didn't really matter. She came to this compound to make a difference in the world. She wouldn't let her gift be squashed and trampled anymore. She waved a hand toward the pane of glass.

With almost no effort at all, the two panes rose into the air. They touched together across the straight crack she had made to separate them. And then, by only imagining it in her head, the two pieces melted at the edge and reformed into one smooth pane of glass. As if it had never been cracked.

As she carefully lowered it back to the steel table, Declan's mouth fell open. "I thought no one could levitate the glass. How did you do that?"

With a gulp, she looked at the pink liquid still swirling in her other hand. "I don't know," she said.

* * *

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