

As a child, Gloria was no different from boys. Very often she came home with bruises and dirt all over. On her way to adulthood she turned into the top beauty of the neighborhood. But in other respects she didn't change at all. Gloria was the only child and her aged parents very much feared that they wouldn't live to see their grandchildren because she had scared away all the suitors.

From early childhood Glenn was like a brother to her. They were inseparable. And year by year, it was harder and harder being beside her and not letting close something that was only waiting for the right moment to dig in his heart its teeth and claws with all its might. Gloria had seen him as nothing but the best friend, and Glenn couldn't even imagine himself being so selfish and going so far as to endanger their friendship.

The next day after her birthday Gloria became sick. She withered in no time and after a couple days she was already bedridden. Dark clouds of sorrow gathered over the hearts of her relatives and friends, although Glenn was probably the most heartbroken.

Nobody knew how to save her. The best doctors shrugged their shoulders. Only one thing was certain: at this rate she had no more than a week left.

Everyone took their leave. The only people left in the hospital room were sleeping Gloria and Glenn, who was sitting next to her, with his palm over hers. He sat in the dark and listened to her heavy breathing. Suddenly, the moon emerged from the clouds and peeped into the window casting its light on Gloria, Glenn... and a shriveled old hag standing near.

When Glenn all of a sudden heard the toothless mouth saying "I know how to save her" and turned around, he was scared to death. But the fear of disturbing Gloria's already ever so troubled sleep was so much bigger that he didn't utter a sound. Finally, after rubbing his eyes and coming back to his senses, he whispered to the motionless woman: "Tell me."

It turned out that Gloria was cursed by an envious evil witch. The only way to lift the curse was to get a rare flower with iridescent heart-shaped petals. And the crone knew just where to find one, only it grew far-far away: overseas, deep into the woods... "But Gloria has no more than a week!"

The crone, although being far too old for witchcraft, couldn't say no to the poor boy and out of pity agreed to use all the magic she had left in her to help him. She waved her hands and a door opened in the wall. The woman went in and beckoned to Glenn.

At that moment Gloria opened her eyes. "Glenn?" He just squeezed her hand in parting and promised to be back with a cure. After that he went into a wall and disappeared. Gloria couldn't believe her eyes, but when she woke up the next morning she thought it was all just a dream. That was the last time she was conscious.

The crone was a little short of magic to bring them to the exact place, so Glenn was stuck for the whole night in some impassable jungle trying to make his way to his target. At last, he found the desired flower. As he was told, he picked it and gave it to the crone. The next moment he was tied hand and foot by spiny vines arisen from the ground. The more he moved, the more thorns tore into his flesh. He couldn't free himself.

"You fooled me!"

"I didn't. This flower, if eaten, will most certainly cure any illness. But this flower can also give me back my youth and powers. I'll be able to practice witchcraft again. Besides, I didn't tell you that I'd help you save Gloria. I said only that I knew how to save her. As you would expect, this flower could be plucked only by a person with a pure heart and good intentions."

"It was you! It was all your doing! You cursed Gloria!"

He cried out in despair to all gods he could think of, to any deity that could possibly hear him. He prayed for freedom. The next moment he turned into a little bird and managed to snatch the flower out of the witch's hand that was putting it in her mouth. He flew away and left her for dead deep in the jungle. It appeared that the journey really used up all her power.

Sadly, Glenn couldn't possibly be back in time. When he realized that he cried out the second time. He prayed for the tailwind, for being able to fly without rest, sleep, food and water, only to get there before it's too late.

Six days later he flew in through the window and found Gloria at death's door. She wasn't supposed to live through that night. He pushed his bill through her lips and teeth and regurgitated the flower into her mouth.

The next morning Gloria woke up sound and full of energy. Only a dead little bird on her chest left a tinge of sadness after her awakening.

Glenn disappeared without a trace. And after some time Gloria started to suspect that what she saw and heard that night wasn't just a dream.

During one of the sleepless nights she was sitting by the window weeping and looking at the moon. "You said you'd come back! You promised!"

"Unfortunately, he had no choice but to sacrifice his life to save you", she heard the voice of someone really close by.

"Who's here?!" Gloria looked around but saw no one.

"It's me. Look down at the sill", said a spider. "Wanna try save him?"

"He sacrificed his life for me! Of course I'll do anything!"

"Well, no promises, but I pretty believe I know someone who could help. Shall I take you there?"

"Yes!"

"But I want something in return. I want you to give me the most beautiful thing you have... Your eyes, it is."

"My eyes?" Gloria was terrified.

"He sacrificed his life for you! What's a pair of balls compared to that?"

"So be it", answered Gloria. "You can take 'em."

After sinking into bottomless darkness she heard the voice: "Here, take this web. I've spun it between you and the place you need to be. Just hold it and follow it. Good luck."

After a while Gloria came to the tree the end of the web was attached to.

"Is anyone here?"

"Yes, the spider told me about your misfortune. Well, cannot really promise you anything, but I can take you to her. She will definitely know."

"Deal."

"But let me cut your hair first. I need it for the nest."

"Hehe, compared to the eyes it's nothing. It'll grow."

"It will not", whispered in her ear the bird that landed on her shoulder.

Gloria sighed. "Just take it".

Finished with the nest, the bird, as promised, brought her to the wise snake. "Here she is!" said the bird and flit away in fright.

Gloria felt the snake coiling around her and before long she could hear it murmuring into her ear: "I know exactly who can help you. Sentinel is my old friend. If you ask him nicely, he'll return Glenn to you."

“Good! Lead the way.”

“Not so fast. You shall give me your skin... My, my, do not be so afraid. In return, I will give you my old skin as well as the ability to perceive the world as I do, so you will be able to find the Sentinel on your own.”

Gloria conceded.

When she met with Sentinel she asked him to return Glenn. Sentinel agreed to do it for half of her lifespan. She just couldn't turn down such a generous offer. After all, Glenn had sacrificed his whole life for her, so what's half of her lifespan compared to that?..

And only when Glenn's footsteps were heard from afar and she heard him saying “Who's there?” did she realize that there is no way she could appear before him in her new look. And not just before him. From now on, she couldn't show herself to other people. In fear, she ran away.

In the end, Glenn was lucky enough to find his way out of the forest. He reached his hometown. The joy of his parents knew no boundaries. But, as he was told, although Gloria really did get better, she went missing not long after. Some people said they believed they saw her going towards the forest...

After a month of unsuccessful attempts, search teams abandoned all hopes. Only Glenn refused to give up. He began to live in the forest as a hermit. One day he was walking on the trail to his home when suddenly he saw ahead someone rolling down the slope. The person must have tripped and fallen down, so Glenn rushed to help. He tried to help the stranger to his feet and grabbed his hand, but at that moment Glenn's hand sent him a feeling of strong repulsion. That was nothing like human skin, more like scales. He couldn't make out the face properly because of the hood, but it too seemed to belong to a non-human being. “What is this monster?!” thought Glenn and recoiled. Either it wasn't a human at all or it was... just with some terrible disease. Seeing an opportunity in Glenn's momentary confusion, the thing concealed itself even more in the hood, long sleeves and long skirt of its garment and immediately took off. After some thought, Glenn decided to help this creature nevertheless. He ran after it shouting that his home was nearby and that there was food and drink, but couldn't catch up. The person in the coat disappeared among the trees. Since that incident there were times when Glenn felt as if being watched by someone from afar.

When winter came, Gloria died from cold. Glenn died from longing in complete loneliness in his hut a few years later.