

Bigger Monsters

A short story

Matti Lena Harris

I'm tellin' ya, in this business we get all kinds.

Like the other day, we got a call from some big hot shot CEO running his corporation out of San Diego. They kept sending their interns down to the basement to get more copy paper—only the interns never came back. Turned out they had a minotaur moved in down there. Took us a week to get it out. That CEO was a big tipper in the end, but he treated us like dirt the whole week. And San Diego's kind of a drive, but hey, work is work.

Thank goodness magical creatures don't take a break during economic downturns.

You could never say business is slow for us, but still I told the boss we oughta expand, go nationwide, get a fancy business name too. Merv's Best Magical Pest Control, or something like that. Has a nice ring to it.

He wasn't buyin' it, though. Ah, well.

So we're a small outfit. Do mostly local work. Like this morning, some old lady calls us from Los Angeles. Says something's been disturbing her koi pond. Insists it ain't a squirrel or a raccoon. Says she's seen it under the water, swimming around with the fish. She can't ever quite make out what it is, but she's convinced it's a kelpie. None of her neighbors believe her, though.

And no wonder. Who ever heard of a kelpie in a koi pond?

Still, for the last few months she's been tellin' everyone who'd listen about her koi pond problem, and finally she found someone with a willing ear—fella' named Bill Haden, who often helps her carry in her groceries. Nice guy, Bill Haden. We helped him out with a pixie infestation last fall, so when he heard her troubles, he gave her our card.

That's how we work, see? That's how the boss likes it. Strictly referral only. It saves on advertising, which is nice.

Over the phone, this old lady says the magic words: "money's no object." That gives her a certain priority, so I drive out to take a look at this koi pond of hers. See what all the trouble's about.

I'm tellin' ya, the doorbell doesn't even stop ringing before she answers the door for me. And she ain't no stereotypical granny neither. This old gal's tall as a telephone post and dressed in black right down to her high heels. Gray hair's pulled back tight in a bun at the nape of her neck, and she's all rouged up on that pale tissue-paper face of hers. Her teeth look real to me, and sharp too. Reminds me of a vampire outta Transylvania so much that when I have a free minute I go and read the vampire checklist—form nine, subsection five in the proper procedures file the boss makes us all keep.

The boss is big on forms.

She only matches five of the fifteen criteria, though, so I move on to business. First, I go through the formalities, introduce myself, and ask her to sign the standard

insurance wavers. She rattles off her name to me—something long and complicated and Russian-sounding. In my head I just call her Knitting Needle Lady because of the long, metal knitting needles she waves in the air whenever she talks. Like she’s conducting an orchestra.

“You will wipe your boots on that mat before you enter my house, please,” she says in a thick Russian accent.

That last bit “please” she says through her teeth like it hurts. Makes me want to remind her that we’re the only outfit in the area, on the whole West Coast, in fact. Gotta go as far as Kansas to find another business with a specialty like ours. But I keep my trap shut. Boss says you always gotta be nice to the customer.

So I just say, “yes ma’am.”

Then she shows me the koi pond.

It’s out in the backyard—a real nice set-up, too. The whole yard’s enclosed by a chest-high brick wall, with hibiscus bushes growing along it. All in bloom. Red. White. Peach, even. Real nice. Pretty little patio, with green lounge chairs. Little hummingbird feeder hanging from the stand in the corner.

No hummingbirds, though. A bad sign.

The koi pond’s the best part of the whole yard, a real show-stopper. It’s got three separate pools—a small one on top, a mid-sized one below it, and a big one at the base—and each pool flows into the one beneath it. In the biggest pool, water lilies float on the water’s surface. The whole thing is made of rocks so round and smooth they’ve gotta be fake. Real Hollywood-style.

Five koi fish are swimming around down there, all lazy and fat. Knitting Needle Lady points at them.

“I had seven fish last week. Now there are less. You see? One, two, three, four, five.” She waves her knitting needle at each one as she talks, like I’m too stupid to count.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say.

“And it is not raccoon or squirrel that takes them. I watch. I put out poison. It is not that. I started with ten fish in the beginning.”

I take a deep breath. Sometimes you can tell what creature it is by the smell in the air, but I don’t smell nothin’. Except maybe Knitting Needle Lady’s perfume. Like rotten roses and old Comet cleanser.

“You ever hear any suspicious sounds, ma’am? Roars? Growls? Squawks? Anything like that?”

“No. The whole time, it is quiet.”

The backyard looks fine. No mess or nothin’.

“So?” she says. “What are you going to do about my fish?”

I clear my throat. “Well, ma’am, the first thing I gotta do is take some samples of the pond water for testing.”

I open up my case and unpack the sample test kit. Knitting Needle Lady stands right behind me, glaring.

"If you don't wanna be out here, you don't gotta," I say. "I mean, if you wanna go back to your knitting or whatever. Watchin' all this is gonna be about as exciting as watchin' a dentist do a root canal."

"I will watch," she says.

"Yes, ma'am."

She's probably the type that likes watchin' root canals.

I take a sample from the top pool first, but the test results are inconclusive, so I move to the middle pool. Still inconclusive. I move to take a sample from the bottom pool.

"Stop!" Knitting Needle Lady shouts so loud I jump and nearly take a bath with the koi.

"What! What!" I cry out.

For all I know, she's seen a manticore or somethin' sneakin' up behind me, and stupid me, I left my manticore net in the truck.

"Watch out for Fluffy-kins!"

She's got me so amped up that for nine sweet seconds I'm trying to remember which monster a Fluffy-kins is, and I'm prayin' I've got a cage that's big enough. Then she waves her knitting needles at the ground right behind me, so I spin around.

Boy-oh-boy, do I need a new line of work.

There's this little shrine set up beside the pool, with flowers and candles all around it. On the left, there's a few small cat toys—stuffed mice and plastic balls and bells and whatnot. On the right, there's a pink knit pillow with the name *Fluffy-kins* on it. In the center of it all, there's a life-sized statue of a cat. A scowling cat.

I scowl right back at it.

"You will not step on Fluffy-kins," she says.

First, I think I might tell her just where Fluffy-kins can go to, and next I think I might tell her just where she can go to. Then I think that if I do, the boss'll be telling me just where *I* can go to.

"Yes, ma'am."

So I focus on the test results from the bottom pond instead. The little test strip is bright red. A very bad sign.

"Well?" She puts her hands on her hips.

"Oh, yeah. You definitely got somethin', lady."

"Something. Something. This I know already. There is no need for some silly test to tell me what I know already!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Most of the guys at work have different theories about how these kinds of magical creatures came into being. Stan, our clean-up guy, says they're the result of a

bunch of scientists who got a little too punchy one night and mixed up some funky batches of DNA, thanks to a dare and too many shots of tequila. Miguel, our accountant, says such creatures are inevitable when viewed in conjunction with evolutionary theory. Single-cell organisms eventually evolve into fish, which eventually sprout legs and evolve into unicorns. Now, I'm not all that convinced, but I always tell him if he comes across some proof, to let me know. A Unicorn-fish...unifish? Fishicorn?

I just hope the missing link ain't in this koi pond.

For a minute or two, I stare at the black, smooth water. That pond runs pretty deep, I'd guess. Any number of nasties could be livin' in there. Down at the deepest part of the pond, a single tiny bubble rises up and pops at the surface.

"Well?" Knitting Needle Lady demands.

Fortunately in this business, we got lots of tests. Since the pond water sample test was positive, it's time for the next one: a sonar test. I figure a sonar test would be best since she said she saw the creature swimming around down there with the fish. If she's right, that would rule out any air-borne creatures.

Mostly.

So I get the equipment out of the truck and haul it on over to the side of the pond. Most customers get real impressed when they see the gear we got for the sonar test. It's a big black box with wires and dials and battery packs and headsets and underwater speakers and green lights and digital computer screens and such. Looks real high tech.

But not Knitting Needle Lady. She just rolls her eyes and mutters something. Couldn't quite catch what it was. Something about ridiculous technological contraptions and incompetent work.

"Do not make any mess of my koi pond," she says at last.

"Yes ma'am."

So I get everything set up, and I start the test. The underwater sound transmitters send out a signal that bounces 'round the pool and then comes back to me, where it forms an image on the screen. Takes a few minutes before the whole picture is visible, so I sit back and watch the screen as the images fall into place.

First image—the sides of the pond. Nothing strange there.

Second image—the koi fish, all five of 'em. Swimming 'round the water plants. Still looks normal.

Third image—a blur. 'Bout as big as a rat.

I rub the screen a few times with my palm, but it don't do no good. I try to focus in on that area for more detail, and I turn up the strength of the signal. Whatever the creature is, it's got a fish tail. Looks like fur on the upper half of the creature. Paws. Whiskers.

The image is almost there. I lean in a bit and turn up the signal. Almost....

“Silence!” Knitting Needle Lady shouts. Which makes me jump. Which knocks the whole sonar set up into the water—battery packs, computer screen, data storage drive, all of it.

Did I mention only the sound transmitters were waterproof?

“There must be silence now!” she says. She walks over to that shrine and places a hibiscus flower in front of the Fluffy-kins statue.

“It was at this hour and minute that my precious Fluffy-kins died. There must be minute of silence.”

Oh, I observe that minute of silence—but not for any stupid cat. I observe it for my sonar equipment. All five thousand dollars of it. And that nice long minute of silence gives me a lot of time to think about a lot of things. Like what the boss is gonna do when he finds out what’s happened to the sonar equipment. And what a joy it’d be to take that cute little statue of Fluffy-kins and punt it right over the edge of the pond so it can have a place of rest right next to my ruined sonar device.

It also starts me thinkin’ about somethin’ else: a theory.

“Excuse me ma’am,” I say once the minute of silence is over, “this cat of yours. It ever make visits to the koi pond?”

“Ah, everyday.” She waves her knitting needles at the pond. “For hours Fluffy-kins would sit by this pond. Never would she eat any koi fish. She was always good. She would just watch.”

“Uh-huh. And this problem of yours with the koi. Did it start before or after your cat died.”

“It was after.”

Yup. I think that settles it.

“Ma’am,” I say. “I believe I know what your trouble is. You’ve got mermice.”

She looks at me like *I’m* the one who’s nuts. And that’s a laugh all to itself. But mostly my theory makes sense. I figure it this way. Cat visits pond. Cat catches mermice. Cat eats mermice. No problem. Cat dies. Mermice come back.

Problem.

Course, it don’t explain the missing koi fish. Mermice don’t eat koi. Still, I figure the sooner the mermice are contained, the sooner I can go home and leave Knitting Needle Lady to her koi pond and her Fluffy-kins shrine and call it a day.

And maybe it ain’t such a big problem, yet. The sonar test only picked up one of ‘em. One mermouse, if I can catch it, ain’t so bad. It’s only when they breed that problems really start.

The challenge is finding the best way to catch it.

There’s always the old fashioned way to catch a mermouse. Since the creature is half-mouse and half-fish, you just attach a mousetrap to a fishing pole along with some decent bait, then cast your line into the pond, and let nature take its course.

But the boss favors live-catches. Trap and release, if possible. And since the mermouse's intelligence level is only my best guess, I figure I'll try the bait cages first. I've got some in the truck that should be 'bout the right size.

Course, I have to convince Knitting Needle Lady that the cages won't hurt her precious Koi first. That takes a good twenty minutes. Then I have to load up all the bait. Finally, I set out the cages across the bottom of the pond in an even spread as best as I can.

There's just one thing I notice, one thing as I set out the last trap. Over at the far end of the pond, there are these gigantic scratch marks in the earth. Look like something a lion or a tiger might make.

And next to that, a long black feather.

In this business, we got a saying: there's always a bigger monster. It's the same principle as the food chain. No matter what monster comes around, no matter how bad or vicious or nasty that monster may be, there's always some monster that's worse waiting just around the corner.

So I start rethinking my theory. The new one goes like this. Cat visits pond. Cat catches mermince. Cat eats mermince. No problem. Cat dies. A mermouse comes back. Problem. Some new monster comes around, tries to eat the mermouse. The mermouse is too clever for it to catch. New monster settles for koi dinner instead.

Much bigger problem.

Course, the question is, what to do now?

Guess it's best not to tell Knitting Needle Lady, or at least not yet. Last thing I need is a customer dyin' of a heart attack. 'Specially since I don't even know what this new monster is, exactly. I've got a little free time while I'm waitin' on the bait cages, so I head on out to my truck and read the proper procedures file, specifically form eleven. The one that deals with creature marks of unknown origins.

Unknown creatures that slither—that's subsection six. Thank goodness it ain't that. I remember the last time we had an unknown that turned out to be a basilisk. I still get nightmares over that one.

Unknown creatures that scratch—that's subsection seven, and that's more like it. Definitely got a scratcher, whatever it is. But feathers, too. Which makes it more interesting. And more difficult to pinpoint.

A phoenix? It's got talons, which could account for the scratches, and it's got feathers, but their feathers are gold, not black. Besides, there ain't no scorch marks anywhere near the pond.

Griffin? It's a distinct possibility, I suppose. Lion body, eagle head. The lion part could make the scratch marks easy enough. But that feather I found. It ain't no eagle feather.

"AyyeEEEE!"

Out in the backyard, Knitting Needle Lady lets loose a shriek that woulda given a heart attack to a harpie. So I drop everything and run back to see what the matter is.

The koi pond's got a bunch of ripples in it, like something maybe made a big splash, and Knitting Needle Lady's jumping up and down while waving her knitting needles at the water.

"It is there! It is there!" she cries. "I saw it! It is there!"

I check the traps, and sure enough trap four's been triggered and now there's something in it. I pull trap four up out of the water and take a look inside.

Fish tale. Mouse head. Yup. A mermouse.

This is weird stuff always, I'm tellin' ya.

He looks at me with his shiny black eyes and twitches his whiskers at me a few times, like he's sniffin' me out. He ain't nothing special. I hear some mermice can get real colorful, the tropical ones mostly, with bright electric blue tales and yellow fur, if ya can believe it. But this one's all gray. Gray tale, gray fur. Still, I figure he's kind of a cute little fella.

So I get a medium-sized plastic containment tank from the truck and a pair of containment gloves. Handling mermice ain't such a bad thing, really—no fiery breath, no poisonous fangs to watch out for. Nothing nasty of the usual sort.

But still, never can be too careful. They're rodents, after all, so they can be carriers of different sorts of badies, like germs and bacteria. Think there's a problem with antibiotic-resistant bacteria strains in the world today?

You ain't seen nothing till you start adding magic to the mix.

But Knitting Needle Lady don't seem to think the mermouse is cute. As soon as I get it in the tank, she starts pounding my back with her fists.

"Kill it! Kill it!" she yells.

I thought little old ladies were supposed to be quiet and sweet, but not this one. She's out for blood. She lets out a screech that's something like a cross between the croak of a crow and the roar of a bear. Highly unnatural, and highly creepy.

Then she goes suddenly silent, not pounding my back anymore or shouting for me to send this little mermouse the bar tab. I turn my head and look at Knitting Needle Lady's face. She's lookin' paler than when I first met her, if that's even possible. She's just standin' there, not even twitching. She's all froze up.

That's about the time I realize. The blood-thirsty screech? It didn't come from her. It came from a different monster.

A much bigger monster.

Corvus ursidae.

That's the scientific name for it. Usually the professionals in my trade shorten the name and call them corvursids. Me, I call them all kinds of names you can't use in polite society. 'Cause they are real trouble.

Imagine a huge crow. Big and black and noisy. Picture the beady round eyes, the clapping beak, the giant black wings. And intelligence. Spooky intelligence. A corpse-bird. Feeds off death and refuse and rot. Unrelenting.

Now take all that and add it to a bear's body. Not a nice thought, is it?

Or imagine a bear. A mean one, like a grizzly. Picture the strong muscles rippling beneath its fur. The excellent sense of smell. And the claws. Don't forget those. Most people who try to outrun a charging grizzly in the wild don't make it, but a few lucky ones might. Think those lucky ones woulda still made it if the grizzly could fly?

'Cause that's what you get in a corvursid. You take a grizzly, give it a giant crow's head and add huge crow wings on its back. A flying grizzly. Think you're outrunning that?

Not hardly.

And lucky me, that corvursid has just landed on the other side of the pond.

"Better get in the house, lady," I say.

No reason for us both to die.

"Y-you can take care of this monster?" Knitting Needle Lady says, kind of breathless.

"I'm a professional, ain't I? Now, just nice and slow. No sudden movements. Ease your way back into the house. Then barricade the door. Just in case."

Knitting Needle Lady, she don't look completely convinced. Usually, most people don't need a whole lot of encouragement when they're told to make a get-away. But not Knitting Needle Lady. She crosses her arms in front of her and lets out snort.

"This is creature that kills my koi?" she asks.

"Yes ma'am."

"You will kill it?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I will watch."

You gotta be kiddin' me.

When it comes to tools for handling these kinds of situations, I've got the usuals. Traps. Cages. Nets. Guns, even. But they're packed in the truck. And I've got what we call "the specialties of the trade," too. Stuff like elixirs and potions and charms. But these things are complicated. They take time to set up. Professional skill. Patience. And you gotta know what you're dealing with before you can put one of those things together. It can't be a rush-job.

Which is all just a way of saying I'm screwed.

The corvursid lifts its head and snaps its beak at me. Then it looks at the tank I'm holdin' with the mermouse inside. And I know that corvursid is thinkin' it's dinner time. Start off with a nice little mermouse appetizer, then on to the main course—me. I got just one thing to try. The last resort of last resorts.

The doomsday rock.

Course, that's not its actual name. The boys at the lab probably came up with something real scientific to call it. Every field worker in our company has one, standard issue, but we don't use it unless we've got no other choice. 'Cause this little baby throws all our risk management policies right out the window. And you would not believe the stacks of paperwork the boss makes us fill out when there's an incident involving the rock.

The doomsday rock ain't much to look at. The lab guys have said it's a type of geode, which sounds impressive, but really it's just a round, brown stone. Kinda looks like a meatball, I guess, which has some of the guys at work callin' it the meatball of doom.

Always gets a laugh, but what this little rock does ain't funny.

I don't know what magic potion or special charm the lab guys used to make the rock, but it's got kick. When it goes off, there's no sound. There's no fire. No debris flying through the air. There's just a crater. Contained, though. Small radius. 'Bout the size of a truck. Which may not sound like much, but believe me, whatever was in that flash radius is gone. Just gone.

Absolutely, completely, and forever.

I keep the doomsday rock in a small safety container in my pants pocket, so I set down the tank with the mermaid very carefully. With any luck, it'll help distract the corvursid. I take a few steps back, but the corvursid keeps its eyes on the mermaid. So far, so good.

Then I reach into my pocket, take out the container, and open the lid. The corvursid's eyes focus on me again, and it growls like it knows I'm up to something.

"Easy there, corvie, nice and easy. Ain't no trouble here," I say real low, tryin' to soothe it as best as a monster can be soothed.

Now comes the tough part. Before the doomsday rock can be used, it's gotta be charged. And to charge it, I have to rub it with my thumb using the exact rhythm of my pulse. The lab guys tried to explain the process to me once. Something about using my latent psychokinetic energy like a match on a fuse.

Whatever. All I know is, the faster the pulse, the faster the rock has to be rubbed to get a charge. And my heart is beatin' at about a thousand beats a second. I don't think I can rub that fast.

But ya' do what ya' gotta do, though, right? So I try to shut the corvursid out of my mind, the smell of its breath like bad meat, its black shining eyes, its claws. Instead, I focus on my heartbeat and the rock. I start counting in my head.

One. Two. Three. One. Two. Three.

Then I concentrate on my heartbeat, and I make the counting match the rhythm of my pulse, rubbing the rock in time.

One. Two. One. Two.

The rock starts getting hot, so I know it's working. The corvursid takes a few steps forward, so I take a few steps back, but I ain't worried now.

"Oh, yeah, you stinkin' corvie?" I say. "You want a treat? I got a treat for you right here."

I lift the rock, ready to throw it and then go start fillin' out paperwork. But right at the last minute, as I'm winding up and getting ready for the pitch, my foot catches on something, and I go flyin' backwards. As I'm sprawlin' through the air, I see a glimpse of what that something was.

The Fluffy-kins statue.

I tripped on the stupid cat shrine. Unbelievable, right? I crash into the patio furniture and the humming bird feeder. The doomsday rock goes shooting outta my hand in who-knows-which direction.

And now, I'm really, really screwed.

The only bright side I can see to this sudden turn of events is that I won't have to fill out any paperwork. Unless there's paperwork in heaven. Or maybe hell. There's probably paperwork in hell.

The corvursid rears up on its hind legs now, stretching to its full height. It takes a hulking step forward, growling and drooling, but it ain't sniffing at the mermouse anymore. Guess it wants to go straight for the main course.

Then, there's a crunch.

Would ya believe it? That corvursid went and stepped on the Fluffy-kins statue. Smashed it to pieces. At least there's some consolation before death. A moment of grace. I'd be blessed enough to see that stupid cat statue bite the dust first.

But boy-oh-boy, that just about does it for Knitting Needle Lady.

She lets out this howl the likes of which I ain't ever before heard uttered by bird, fish, or beast, not magic or plain, not deadly or tame.

"You stepped on Fluffy-kins!" she screams. "You stepped on my precious Fluffy-kins!"

So, there's always a bigger monster? Well, I'll tell ya. Sometimes, the customers are the bigger monsters.

That Knitting Needle Lady, she pounces on the corvursid's back. Makes me wonder if she secretly watches championship wrestling every night. She's clingin' to the corvie right behind its wings, with her legs wrapped around its belly and her arms wrapped around its neck. Her high heels go flyin' off. She starts drooling in her fury—spittle sprayin' and fangs showin'. The whole fight sounds like a lion and a bear takin' it to the teeth.

Then, she starts stickin' that corvursid with her knitting needles over and over again, wherever she could find an opening.

Stab, stab, stab.

And all the while, she's screamin' out, "Fluffy-kins! Fluffy-kiiiiiiins!"

The guys at work are never gonna believe this. And how am I gonna explain this in the paperwork? 'Cause there ain't no form or section or even subsection in the proper procedures file that covers *this* one.

Now, I'm all for lettin' Knitting Needle Lady have at it with the corvursid. I mean, hey, she's puttin' up a darn good fight, and if she wants vengeance for her precious Fluffy-kins statue, I say let her take her best shot. There's just one problem.

The doomsday rock.

See, that little baby's still charged and tickin' somewhere in this backyard.

So while Knitting Needle Lady's keepin' the corvie busy, I start lookin' for the rock. I look under the pile of patio furniture, and around the hibiscus bushes, and even in the koi pond. No luck.

Just when I'm about to give it up and start sayin' my last prayer, I glance at the crushed remains of the Fluffy-kins shrine and what do I see?

The rock.

No wonder I missed it first time around, mixed in with the broken bits of the cat statue. I grab the rock and throw it at the corvursid, but the rock's so charged up that it's pretty hot and my aim ain't so great. I hold my breath as it hits the ground a few feet away from the corvie.

Then it bounces twice.

Finally, it rolls right beneath the corvie's feet.

Perfect.

Now all I gotta do is get Knitting Needle Lady and me to safety. 'Cause that rock ain't got much time left before it goes off.

"Time to go lady!" I yell as I wrap my arms around her waist and pry her off.

For that feat alone I figure I should get the employee-of-the-year award. But the trouble ain't over yet. Only seconds left before it's big bang time. And there's only one place I can think of that might be safely outside the radius of the doomsday rock.

Sure hope Knitting Needle Lady can swim.

The doomsday rock starts making this high-pitched tone, which means it's show time. With one big swing, I hurl Knitting Needle Lady into the koi pond, and then I jump in after her. As I dive in, I can feel the energy of the detonation filling the space behind me, and then I'm safe underwater.

By the time we come back to the surface of the water, the doomsday rock has done its work. The corvie's been obliterated, of course. So's the patio furniture. And the hummingbird feeder. And two of the hibiscus bushes. And a bit of the brick wall.

Knitting Needle Lady clammers out of the koi pond and stands blinkin' at the crater where the corvie had been only seconds before. Her black mascara's runnin' down her cheeks, and her black dress looks like a wrung-out trash bag. She seems at a loss for words—confirmation that there are miracles in life. While she stands there gaping, I hoist myself out of the pond and look down at my feet.

There's that mermouse still swimmin' round in his tank, right where I put it, less than a foot from the crater. I kneel down to look inside the tank, and I swear that little mermouse is smiling at me.

One corvie dead. One mermouse contained. Good day's work, if you ask me.

"Look on the bright side, ma'am," I say. "Fill it with water, and you've got another koi pond."

"Y-you, you do this!" Knitting Needle Lady points at the crater.

Uh-oh.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And my backyard, you make it like this? My patio furniture, my hibiscus bushes, my hummingbird feeder, my wall, you make them all go poof! Gone!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"This incompetence is too much! First, you waste my time with silly useless tests! Then you litter my koi pond with your big hunk of useless equipment! And now this!" She makes a big sweeping motion at the crater with her arms. "For this, I will make your job go poof! Gone!"

Maybe some people might think that Knitting Needle Lady would deserve a break. A little understanding. After all, she's been through a lot. But me, I've been through a heck of a lot more, and I just can't take this any longer. Even if it does mean my job goes poof-gone.

With some monsters, all you can do is face them, no matter the cost.

"Listen, lady!" I shout. "You saved my life, and I saved yours. That's how these things work in this business, and I figure we're square. This whole time I've put up with your bossin' and your snubbin' and your fussin'! So you can quit it right now, or I'm puttin' this little mermouse back in the koi pond. You understand me, lady?"

Her face flushes pink, then red, then purple. All the way to her earlobes. Her mouth opens and shuts and opens again 'til I start to think she's been takin' lessons from the koi. Her whole body gets to shakin' like she's a doomsday rock about to explode. I'm waitin' for it, holdin' my breath, and then I see the strangest thing I've ever seen in my entire thirty-two years in this business. And that's saying something.

That crazy Knitting Needle Lady, she grins.

"Yes, sir," she says.

And that's it. She pays her bill, helps me pack up my gear in the truck, and even offers me a cup of tea. I figure whoever said truth is stranger than fiction must have been a magical pest control employee.

'Cause boy, I'm tellin' ya, in this business we get all kinds.