

Home.

How long they plodded through that empty, featureless world Polly couldn't tell. It seemed hours, but it might have been days, weeks or minutes.

A dark shape loomed in front of her abruptly and she came to a stop, looking up at the plain, un-extraordinary apartment door.

There was a small windowsill on her right that had a dead petunia sitting in soil that seemed to have more moss than anything else growing in it. In front of her stood a plain brown door with a large brass knob and the numerals 42 in small bronze placards. Uniquely, there stood a huge gold knocker under the apartment number in the shape of an eagle, with the hoop clutched in the talons and the large tail feathers forming the strike plate. The wings stretched out on either side nearly the width of the door.

"We are here." He announced, slipping off her back.

Polly found her balance thrown off when he did that; she'd never had anyone slide off her back before. She took one dainty step to recover her balance and nearly stepped on Molly's paw (the stoop was rather cramped).

Pulling an old fashioned barrel key out of his pocket, he slipped it into the keyhole and turned it counter clockwise.

The lock clunked open and he put the key back into his pocket.

"Welcome to my house." He said lukewarmly as he pushed opened the door and stepped inside.

Polly wondered briefly how he was going to fit both her and Molly inside as she stepped in after him. What she saw took her breath away.

Just past the door, she found herself inside an enormous arched hallway so tall it seemed to have its own atmosphere. The floor had wine-red carpeting stretching wall to wall. Along either side standing silent guard were four sets of armor, two on each side. In between both of them he'd placed a table, some comfortable chairs for taking off shoes, a wardrobe for hats and coats, and a walnut trunk with iron workings. Great stained glass let in light through multi-colored facets (deep blue for the upper half-moon meeting at a center of ruby red, while the large square section glistened a soothing green like mountain meadow).

Glancing up she gasped. Hanging from an iron hook thicker than her arm tumbled an enormous iron chandelier.

Unlike the delicate glass light candelabra she was used to seeing in movies of rich people's manors, this monster eschewed any hint of diaphaneity about itself. It had five double pentagons of thick metal bars arranged in tiers with the larger

enclosures above and the lesser ones below. The largest measured about five feet across, while the smallest still measured about a foot-and-a-half. In the center of the double pentagons were arranged hundreds of candles burning brightly (Polly thought they were absolutely real until she got a closer look and realized they were a form of electric candle). A colossal chain supported the structure, each dark link thicker than Polly's wrist. The metal face was adorned with strange silver-wrought runes on the side.

"Ah, admiring my dwarf-made chandelier?" the warlock said with a smile. "It is impressive, isn't it? It's fairly one-of-a-kind now, after I modified it to take some electric candles instead of the real fellows. Saves me a lot of effort with the hot wax and risk of fire. Plus the blasted thing used to get so hot that it sent the occasional moth bursting into flame and crashing to the floor like some World War I bi-plane, if you can imagine that."

He swept through the hall and turned open the ornate handles of two oak doors on the far side.

Gesturing for them to follow, he disappeared to the other side.

Polly and Molly stared at each other as if to ask "now what?"

Without a word, they turned towards the front door and struggled to open it, but the handles didn't turn and the door refused to budge.

Molly started to hurl her body against it, growling in frustration as she sought to batter the door down, but Polly could see that she wouldn't be able to accomplish anything.

Wondering if the warlock would come back for them, Polly reached out to Molly.

She started at the touch on her shoulder. Looking questioningly at her, Polly shook her head in negative and pointed towards the open door. They'd spent too much time her, she felt certain, and it wouldn't be long before he'd stomp back in demanding to know what had happened to them.

Molly shrugged hopelessly and took *her* hand. Polly got the strangest feeling that Molly was trying to comfort *her*.

Though grateful as she was for the human, for she still thought them both as human no matter what they looked like, she couldn't afford to dwell yet on her reality. If she did, she thought she'd lay on the ground and die of heartbreak.

They walked through the double doors and into the space beyond. The man who'd entrapped them stood patiently waiting underneath a balcony on which hung a bizarre clock.

It had six hands, and no numerals on its face. Instead, it had the phases of the moon, several water symbols that she took to mean the time, and three hands on which hung tiny portraits, though the distance was too far for her to make out who they were. She wondered who else lived in the house.

"Now that you have satisfied yourselves that escape is impossible for you, we will go over some quick rules for the night before we turn in."

"I gotsa question." Molly managed to drawl out.

"What is it?" he asked urbanely.

"What's yer name?" she demanded belligerently.

"I see. Well, my name is Konner Seawright, not that it means much to you." He said in a bored voice. "You may call me Master, or mister Seawright, if that is easier for you."

"I ain't ever going to call ya master, ya pig." Molly said contemptuously.

"I'm beginning to suspect I gagged the wrong person." He said in an annoyed tone. "You will have to learn to curb that tongue in my presence, if you wish not to follow Polly."

He spoke before Molly could respond.

"Now that my name is out of the way, I will go over a couple of basic rules for tonight and then I will show you to your rooms. Rule one; Treat my things with respect. Not," he added at Molly's look of *Yeah, right*, "because I would be annoyed—well, I would but that's beside the point—but because there are things in this house that have old curses on them, or charms that perform a specific function and you could become trapped in them or suffer undue pain. It is for your safety that I tell you this, and I will go over a few of the more nasty ones tomorrow. Rule number two: Always be prompt. I stick to a schedule in my household as you will find and I will expect you to know it as well. It is not onerous and I expect you will have no difficulty in following these simple instructions."

He turned around and strode down the leftmost of the three corridors.

Seeing no choice, they followed behind, noting that there were at least a dozen doors that they could see.

"Here are your rooms." He announced, coming at last to the last two doors in the hallway.

Opening the left one first, they stepped inside.

Polly noticed right away that the room was more spacious than her family's entire apartment in town. But it was entirely devoid of furnishings or anything else, like a storeroom without boxes, pictures, and the other keepsakes that found their way into such places. About the only normal thing she could see was the thin layer of dust on the walls and bare floors.

"Now, obviously this won't do at all." He commented. "But I'll fix that."

With a wave of his hand several boards appeared in midair and attached themselves into a large square, almost like a sandbox. A mattress filled the empty space and blankets came from the hall and passed her like Halloween ghosts to wrap themselves snugly around the foam. Then came several squishy pillows from somewhere to complete her bed.

He quickly went to work on the rest of the room, and soon

she had a dividing wall that led to a bathroom for her, which included a normal size sink and medicine cabinet, a magnificent shower, and a large square basin in the floor with a drain and jets along all sides. She learned later that this was the centaurian toilet; once her business was done, the jets would shatter and mulch the waste to wash it down the drain and outside to the gardens.

"That should do it for now." He said calmly. "Now for you." He said to Molly, walking across the hall.

Polly peeked through her door to see him doing the same act in Molly's room, with the exception that her bed consisted of a enormous basket perched on its own pedestal about five feet off the floor. What the rest of the room looked like, Polly didn't know.

"Now we are ready for bed." Konner said.

Pausing at the door, he looked at both women.

"Now, I understand that you are still in shock and confused, and that tonight you both might really might wish to talk, but I'm afraid I must insist that you both go to bed and sleep tonight. There will be plenty of time to discuss things in the morning."

Before either could speak, the doors slammed shut.

"OUCh."

Polly could clearly hear Molly's cry even through the thick doors. She winced in sympathetic pain, her long slender fingers reaching up to touch the tip of her nose before she could force her hand back down to her sides.

Polly looked around the room vacantly, not really taking in the details that surrounded her; the fine oak boards that made her furniture, the muted golds and blues of her wallpaper, the peaceful scenic paintings that adorned the walls, each more than she could ever afford in her life.

Her one sole thought was: *How had this happened?*

For the life of her she couldn't find an answer.

She walked slowly over to the bed, her hoofbeats muted to almost nothing on the tough carpeting.

Tentatively putting her hand out, she felt the fine linen covers. Her hand appeared to be swallowed by the foam mattress beneath.

How am I going to lay on that?! She wondered, staring at her horse body starting at her belly button. Glancing behind at her huge butt, she stared down and gulped.

Gingerly, she curled both front legs, her hooves digging into the carpet and causing her to lean forward. A brief moment of panic ensued as she imagined herself toppling forward, but then she found the floor with a gentle thump.

The sideboard, she noticed with relief, was very low and actually seemed to taper down in a sort of wedge shape to the floor.

That will make it easier. She thought in relief.

Now came the tricky part, getting her butt to the floor.

Looking behind her, she tried to figure out how; she didn't come with an instruction manual after all!

She tried inching her back legs forward. Success! She almost sighed with relief when she watched her hindquarters begin to drop.

Carefully she eased down the rest of the way.

Now on the floor, she had to think on what was the best way to roll onto the bed.

She managed, with only a few scrapes on her tender sides, to make it onto the mattress.

She closed her eyes and basked in the wonderful sensation of floating on air.

Mmm, this has to be the next best thing to heaven, she thought contentedly.

Wait, contentedly? Heaven?

Snap out of it girl, she shook her head. She was a prisoner after all.

Coming back upright to her belly, she found the position very comfortable, and settled down to think.

First, she thought about the entire sequence of events over the night, shivering at the ease with which Greg's gang had been taken down. They'd been as helpless as sardines before sharks.

Then she thought about her own predicament, and what it likely meant for her. As she stared at her full breasts, bare to the world now, she wondered if he'd deliberately let her grow out of her clothes, and if he meant to leave her and Molly naked the rest of their lives for his pleasure.

She shivered and felt the tingle of horror. No, she'd have to do everything to stay away from him in case he got those ideas, but how could she do it?

Finding no answer, she turned to her strange companion, Molly.

She wished she knew more about the strong-woman of the gang, but she'd been a recent addition he'd picked up two weeks ago. She'd remembered how proud Greg had been, boasting to the gang that he'd witnessed her personally beat three men in a bar fight and then rob them while they were on the floor. He'd offered her a job then and there, and she'd accepted. The first day they'd gone on two armed robberies and burglarized two houses, as well as his favorite pastime of mugging a couple of men in the park. She'd held her own in all of them, even taking down one of the biggest guys there with a arm chop that left him stretched cold on the ground for hours.

After that she'd been a welcome member of the gang. Polly tried to remember if she'd even said where she'd came from, but Molly hadn't talked much about her past history with the gang at all.

Polly found it curious, after all, bragging about past victories and their vicious roots seemed to be the favorite

hobby of the others when they were laying low at somebodies house.

She began to realize that she didn't really know her companion at all, though that could simply have been her own fault. She didn't like socializing with the others when she could beg out of it.

Oh well. Polly shrugged her shoulders. She would be a sight better than having to deal with Konner on her own.

She hoped that they would be able to get along, their lives depended on it.