

## Classes

The next morning passed very quickly for Polly. The sheer size of the house kept her on her feet as she hunted dust bunnies with vacuum or duster in hand. Behind armor and in cabinets proved to be no respite from her searching gaze.

As she worked she commented silently to herself, thinking that just a couple of days ago she'd been living in her family's apartment and hating to do the cleanup work necessary to maintain it. Now she was too frightened to complain or scared to death of failing Konner lest he punish her further; the lack of voice kept her focused and alert.

Molly helped as best she could, when she came out of the kitchen. With only three of them in the household the kitchen duties proved to be exceptionally light and so she could get the cleanup over with a pocketful of minutes left over, as her grandfather might say.

Lunch proved uneventful, but now they were going to go to their first class, and Polly found herself nervously anticipating what would happen when they got inside the library.

Opening the big doors, they stepped inside.

"Wow!" Molly said softly, looking around her with wide eyes.

Polly grinned, she'd felt the same reaction yesterday when it was her first time, and the library still took her breath away.

They walked under the staring wizard to the desk where Konner sat watching them with a smile, leaving off his own work to greet them.

"It is nice, isn't it?" he asked. "This is my favorite place in the house."

"I can see why." Molly said, her eyes still roaming the scrolls and books and paintings and the fireplace.

Polly heard her accent slip slightly at the end, becoming less coarse and more refined, but it was gone so fast she wondered if she'd heard it at all.

Konner frowned faintly, as if he'd caught it as well. He said nothing of it however and a moment later he became utterly inscrutable.

"Your lessons may be found over there." He pointed airily towards two small desks that Polly couldn't remember seeing before when she walked in. They were standing desks, set for their heights, and already loaded down with books, pens and paper.

"I will be testing you on what you've retained at five. You have four hours now to learn what you can. You may begin."

Polly found that her workbooks were on a wide variety of subjects, with heavy emphasis on manners and law, along with

what looked to be a history of the American political system and a state book, and on the very bottom were two books on human physiology and natural biospheres.

*Does he really expect me to finish all of this?* She wondered incredulously.

Some of her thought showed in Molly's face, because she laughed.

"You think we c'n act'llly finish this?" she demanded, turning to Konner.

He didn't even look at her as he snapped his fingers. There was a crackle, a yowl of surprise and fright and the smell of ozone.

Molly's fur stood on end across her entire body. She looked, thought Polly, like a badly made stuffed animal or a white and black bush.

Polly had a inkling of what he'd done, or rather *why* he'd done it, and she grabbed Molly's arm before she could speak.

The angry woman glared sharply out of slitted eyes, her tail lashing the floor in her rage.

Writing quickly on the paper, she passed it to Molly. It read:

Molly, DON'T anger him. He wants you to say "sir". That's all you have to do, I think.

"That ain't gonna fly." She snarled. "I don' say "sir" to anyone, period! I'm Amurican!"

Another crackle and cry sounded in the library. Polly hurled herself on Molly to keep the other woman from bounding across the floor. If she'd thought that her friend might possibly make it that far, she might have let her go and the consequences be damned, but more than likely Molly would get turned into a beetle or something. Polly couldn't let that happen.

"Polly, let me at 'im!" Molly panted, struggling under her greater weight.

Polly didn't budge, and shortly the other woman laid on the floor panting, unable to shake the heavier centaur off.

Polly waited until she was sure that Molly wouldn't strike before she got off the other woman and offered her hand.

Molly glared at her, but took the offer and got to her feet.

Treading lightly, Polly went back to the stand and began to read, keeping her head bowed. She knew the trembling was real, an effect of the adrenaline in her system, but her mind stayed busy. She'd noticed Konner's interest in the struggle, staying out of the tussle and waiting to see what would happen. Now he'd seen her help, perhaps he would begin to trust her more. She'd really like to use her voice again.

*With luck, we can keep working on our plan to get out of here.*

They worked diligently for an hour, reading a chapter or

two of every textbook. It seemed he'd set up an automatic governing spell, for when they reached the end of their assigned reading the book would shut itself and couldn't be opened again despite their best, and sometimes frantic, efforts. They looked fearfully back the first time this happened, but Konner simply nodded to them and motioned for them to move on to the next book.

At the *slap* of the final book closing Konner carefully shut the book he'd been reviewing and stood up.

Coming over to them he stepped up to a blackboard that appeared and, picking up a piece of chalk, he commenced to write their test. Polly took careful notes of the terms:

- 1: What is the history of the Constitution
- 2: What is the simple description of the human cardiovascular system
- 3: Why is proper speech important
- 4: What is the simple description of the local biosphere

All answers are to be in paragraph form, one thousand word minimum, each to take twenty minutes to write.

And then he stepped back to one of the three puffy chairs that were placed in front of the fire place, put his feet up, and waited, keeping an eye on the ornate free-standing clock on the mantle.

Polly bent to her work with a will. She'd never had to write so much before, most of her test answers had been multiple choice and worded so the answer would be plainly obvious to a sewer rat. Here she had no such help and sweat beaded her forehead as she scratched out her lines in her flowing script her mother had taught her years ago. It wasn't technically part of the instructions, but she hoped he'd be appreciative of the fact and would lift his spell on her for her efforts.

Molly cursed and growled softly under her breath, but Polly noticed that her pen flew just as fast as hers did over the papers. Evidently, the static shocks had made her leery. She just hoped that Molly could spell correctly!

They finished with half-a-tick to spare, the clock bonging sonorously covering their pencils coming down.

"Let me see you you've both have done." Konner said, getting up from his chair to collect their work and bringing it back to sit down.

With a wave of his hand he created a long saddle-chair that Polly realized could comfortably support her belly and let her take the weight off her feet while a large mushroom-shaped stool with a quilted pillow top appeared beside her chair.

Polly set herself gingerly, unsure of how it would work. To her relief it proved to be most comfortable and Molly had a look of supreme satisfaction as she curled up on hers.

For long minutes Konner sat going over their works and occasionally inscribing something on their pages with red ink. When he'd finished he passed their work back to them.

Polly read the B+ on her work with relief and chagrin, and she looked at his notes to see how he graded.

*Hmm, not to bad on spelling and punctuation. But what is this? Ah! Oops, mixed up pine with maple, maple's the deciduous tree.*

"Over all, you both did well." Konner complimented. "Surprisingly so, in some cases." He frowned at Molly who gave him a smug look. "Well, no matter. One test does not a student make. You've only begun, after all. This was fairly easy."

He dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

"I'll see you both in the exercise room in forty minutes." He reminded them.

Polly and Molly took the chance to grab some water (being large they required a lot more liquids than they did as humans) before joining Konner down in the exercise room.

He stood waiting for them and greeted them as soon as they stepped into the exercise room.

"Yesterday I allowed you to perform whatever exercise you wished." He said. "I see that both of you are athletic in your abilities and have little need for my help except in that which I am already endeavoring to teach you; discipline. You will have the opportunity to choose your own personal exercises, but they must conform to this larger schedule."

He handed each of them a piece of paper. On hers Polly read:

Twenty minutes, cardio activities (running, walking, jogging, jumping, etc.)

Twenty minutes: weight lifting of your choice

Five minute cool down period

Twenty minute Yoga.

Molly looked up with a frown. "Yoga" (she pronounced it Yoo-guh). "I ain't ever done that." She admitted. "Don' know how."

"No matter." Konner said. "I do know one or two things about the subject and should be able to teach you some of the basic moves. You'll find it involves a good deal of stretching."

"Fuck that shit." Molly muttered.

The master sighed, a moment there came a static pop and Molly yowled in consternation and anger.

"I think," he said in a suffering voice, "that getting you to stop being vulgar every other sentence is going to take a lot of work."

Molly smoothed her fur down again with a murderous look on her face.

Polly sensed that the mood had become tense now and opted to change the take. Heading for the treadmill she started it on a nice, easy jog. Molly came to hers nearby muttering again but under her breath.

Konner elected to ignore this (perhaps sensing that this would be a long, involved process) and began his own exercise routine which Polly noticed seemed exactly the same as yesterday.

*I wonder if he's got OCD or something like that, she thought. It could be useful later.*

After the PE portion, which Pauline actually found strangely enjoyable, they returned upstairs. She knew she was on her free period now, and had at least an hour and a half before bed. She remembered that Molly had wanted to talk to her so she took the surprised cat by the hand upstairs and walked her to her own room.

Molly's room was set up little different from Polly's, with the biggest difference being, of course, the huge cat bed on a pedestal. Molly glanced at it then settled on the floor, there being a distinct lack of cushions or chairs for them to sit on.

"All right doll, what's eatin' ya?" she asked.

Polly had snuck the white tablet from the kitchen, which she used to write her sentences to Molly.

YOU INVITED ME, REMEMBER? SAID YOU WANTED TO TALK LAST NIGHT.

"Well of course I did." She grinned. "I wanted to know if you wuz up to 'n escape! But I hadn't seen anythin' useful. Did 'ju?"

Polly thought back to their cleaning efforts and shook her head.

NO, I DIDN'T. I THINK THE ONLY ENTRANCES ARE THE BACK DOOR AND FRONT DOOR.

"I thought as much." The cat deflated. "I've done a lot of searchin' and so far couldn't come up with anything. Not even the windows, and god knows this place has a ton of 'em, are no good. They show different places all right; cities and mountains and the sea and whatever, but nothin' we can use to escape."

Molly's loss of her street accent threw Polly for a moment. Looking askance at her companion she hesitated, and then wrote:

MOLLY, DID YOU HAPPEN TO DROP OUT OF ONE OF THOSE IVY SCHOOLS?

Molly grimaced.

"Should'a paid more attention." She commented.

"Look, this doesn't go any further than you, okay?"

She waited for Polly to write her promise.

"All right. Look sweetheart, I already have your number: got it from Greg himself when he boasted how he firmly he had you under his thumb. It was just another piece of evidence for

me to close the case." Polly had a dawning realization. "Yep. Detective Molly Blackwell, at your service." Molly confirmed for her a moment later.

Polly shook her head and mouthed a denial. Molly watched her lips closely, her own mouth moving slowly. Polly realized that she was trying to read her lips!

"Ah...ah...okay. I think I got that. And you're wrong, I am a cop. I got placed undercover to help break up your gang in the park. Participating as the bitch of the group was just a ruse. The next 'victim' was going to be a cop, until this...whatever he is got in the way. We would have made the arrests and you and your gang would have been behind bars."

Her eyes looked sympathetically to Polly. "After I got confirmation of your story, I'd decided to watch you a little closer. You played the role well, but I could definitely tell that you weren't happy in the job and wanted out. I was going to see if I could flip you to state's evidence, but didn't got the chance. Now, I guess the point is entirely moot."

Polly took a step back, both mentally and physically. She felt like she'd been hit by a curveball from left field. She ran through all she knew of Molly, and found it frustratingly vague and empty. She knew almost nothing of this other woman, and she felt frightened of that prospect. She didn't like not knowing, what she didn't know could kill her.

Molly waited for her to adjust, her eyes calm and even, Polly thought, understandingly.

*Well, I guess things aren't always what they seem.*" Thought to herself a little bleakly.

Molly awkwardly patted her shoulder, looking unsure whether or not she ought to.

Polly didn't care. She felt like the dinghy she'd once seen as a child floating down the stream, it's sole occupant, a stripped tabby cat sitting on the prow, looking lost and forlorn as it drifted aimlessly with the current. Her father had splashed out to rescue the cat, but somehow she didn't feel like she'd be rescued here.

*Papa, where are you when I need you?* She silently asked.

*Ah, but you threw that love away, didn't you?* A nasty voice whispered in her ear. *Cast him aside, hung out with Greg even after he warned you. You laughed in his face, told him you knew better, didn't you? Then you were trapped under his thumb and couldn't face him, could you? Oh no, you couldn't after all the fights and arguments at that point.*

She sighed, hearing the truth in the words even as she longed to deny them.

Molly frowned, sensing the cloud of depression that settled on her shoulders.

"Buck up, kid." She slapped her on the shoulder, jolting Polly suddenly from her funk.

"You ain't alone now." She assured her, "whatever happens,

we'll get through this together."

Polly opened her mouth twice to ask a question before she remembered her white board.

WHAT ABOUT TELLING HIM THE TRUTH? She wanted to know.

Molly grimaced. "To be honest with you, I'd thought about doing it, but then he'd probably cast me out of the house with no idea what had happened or whatever, and keep you a prisoner. Worst of it is, there was an arrest jacket out for you, and if I can't get that removed then you'd end up being free of this joker only to wind up in prison. That ain't gonna happen on my watch."

Polly felt...she didn't know how she felt. Here was someone who could have left at anytime simply by revealing who she actually was and yet she stayed silent to ensure Polly was alright.

Was this friendship? Polly didn't know, but she thought it might be.

Moved by impulse she stuck out her hand and after a moment's hesitation Molly took it and shook it vigorously.

"All right then," she exclaimed. "Glad to see you've come around. We stay quiet about my affiliation in front of him, but just between ourselves it's all right."

Polly smiled just as her face cracked into a huge yawn.

She looked at the clock and saw to her surprise that it read nearly an hour after bedtime.

"Holy crap!" Molly said when her attention was drawn to the fact. "We'd better get to bed before we become dead on our feet tomorrow."

A slight grimace crossed her face. "Man, I miss my energy drinks." She said.

Polly shrugged, unsure how to take the strange request. She'd drank quite a few in her time, of course, but she didn't really need them now, for whatever reason.

Writing her good night, she went back to her room. Casting herself on her bed she wondered how she'd ever sleep with all the thoughts awirl, yet somehow the sweet softness of the mattress carried her off into a deep, dreamless sleep.