

New Beginnings

Polly's days began to blur together. The rigid schedule Konner had them on kept her busy nearly the entire day, and the hour or two she had in the evenings to herself were exhausted affairs where she pretty much vegged out on some centaur couch with Molly and read one of the books from the library if she could stay up that long.

She couldn't tell if they'd made any progress on their efforts to escape. The two doors were securely fastened with huge deadbolts that looked as if they'd come off Fort Knox. If that wasn't enough, there were recessed grooves in the floor that would support four huge beams that leaned at a precise sixty degrees on the doors. Once in place she couldn't see how any natural or human force could possibly get through those doors. They'd tried unlatching the doors and simply walking out when he wasn't looking, but the bolts refused to turn for their hands and they stopped after they caught him watching with an amused little smile on his face. He simply grabbed his paper from the table beside the door (where it came from Polly didn't know) and returned to the library.

The windows weren't any good either. Though each of them showed a different place: mountain, seashore, plains, savannah, rain forest, etc., she couldn't seem to open any of them herself without some wild carnivore wandering by and looking at her as if she were lunch about to come within grasp. They'd once tried breaking a window to leap out and run for it, but the glass didn't even scratch at the heavy bust they threw at it, and then the statue started complaining loudly at their rough treatment and threatened to have the master hex them, to which they apologized (and wasn't that weird?) and replaced him back on the table before scurrying away in case Konner did come looking to see what the fuss was about.

Slowly, as time began to lose its meaning for her, she noticed their attempts lessen in frequency. Could they actually be giving up? The blond, blue-eyed girl child in her dreams and memory began to grow ever more remote, and she wished she could reach out and touch her again, just once more.

Something happened that shattered the normal routine that Konner strictly enforced.

Polly was getting ready to bring him his morning plate of toast and a glass of orange juice while Molly made her some oatmeal and she cooked a small turkey for herself when a cry of grief and shock echoed from the library.

Both of them froze, staring at each other with wide eyes at the unusual sound. Then Molly snatched the controls for the range while Polly scrambled for the door.

Molly caught up just before she reached the library door and they both went in. Polly felt her heart hammering in her throat as she entered, wondering what could have happened.

Her worst fear, that Konner might have died and left her forever trapped as a mute centaur, fell away as she saw him standing behind his desk with bowed head. In his hands he gripped his morning papers, the rag crumpled in his fist.

"What's the matter?" Molly asked nervously (in his mood he might

be willing to do anything to them).

"It is nothing that need concern you." He said after a long pause in which they moved closer together for mutual support. He tried to smooth his face and achieved a sort of stony visage devoid of emotion except for his eyes. "A friend of mine has died unexpectedly, is all."

"Oh." Molly said, glancing at the paper.

Polly could see the curiosity in the cop's eyes and she took her hand, ostensibly to show her fright of the situation, but really to give a warning squeeze. A gang enforcer wouldn't be curious about how violence fell on someone; usually they would simply laugh about it in her experience.

Konner must have read something in the glance, however, for he began to speak quietly.

"Well, perhaps it wouldn't hurt to know about it, as I suspect things will be changing here shortly."

Polly shivered, not liking the word already.

"Missus Amanda Goldstein," he said, smoothing the paper and holding up the leading page which headlined: FAMOUS WITCH DIES IN BROOM CRASH above a picture of a woman who might have stepped off the poster of a nineteen-hundred suffragette or something.

"She is, or was, I should say, one of the greatest advocates for peaceful coexistence between the...I guess I should use the term magic community, though we are far more independent than that word implies, and humans. She felt strongly about maintaining status quo and remaining aloof from politics. This means," he added, looking them straight in the eye, "she would never have stepped in to stop your predations on innocents in the park beyond simply calling the police as an anonymous bystander."

"Which is what you shoulda done." Molly broke in angrily.

She yowled as Polly trod (gently) on her foot.

Konner snorted at Polly's attempts.

"Your friend may not agree with you." He said dryly. "But it might surprise you to know that I do." They looked at him. "You would be barely scolded and back on the streets before dinner. That is what you were no doubt thinking." He added dismissively.

"That's not..." Molly began hotly until Polly stepped on her foot a little harder. She desisted with an angry glare.

Konner eyed her speculatively for some time before he came to a decision and waved his hand.

Nothing happened.

They looked bemusedly about for something different or out of place.

"Polly, what are your thoughts on this subject?" Konner asked suddenly.

"I don't think it's right." Polly replied without thinking, her hand going to her little whiteboard she carried in a pouch on her belt.

She froze, suddenly conscious of what she'd said. She looked up to catch Molly's surprised-and pleased-expression.

"S-s-s-sir." She finished reverently, marveling at having her voice back.

A chaotic welter of emotions choked her, but the greatest of them all was joy.

"State your case." Konner continued briskly, as if he didn't recognize what he'd done.

Terror engulfed her: the terror that he'd only given her voice back for this one moment and when she finished or didn't even begin, he'd take her voice away again.

Racking her brains for the longest explanations she could give, she changed tack to try and convince him that she'd done her homework to please him enough he wouldn't.

"Well," she began slowly, relishing her words, "Every criminal has the right to an attorney and proper legal counsel for their trial. And they should have a legal trial with a full jury to decide whether they are guilty or not, based on the evidence, while the counsel advises the defendant or accuser how best to present their case. That way, justice can be fully served."

"That's the idea, but not, sadly, the reality." Konner said. "And besides, that is not really pertinent to my point is it?"

"Yes, it is." Molly insisted before Polly could. "Investigators have to provide enough cold, hard facts to show the accused guilty even with their plea. They have the right to show that the evidence doesn't speak to the whole story and that there might be other factors that the investigators haven't found."

"That may be the case with domestic disputes." He contended, "But never for muggings or murder."

"Unless it is to protect others or themselves." Polly argued, marveling at her audacity.

"Everyone has the right to protect themselves, granted." Konner agreed. "But robbing a person of their wallet after luring them under false pretenses and beating them nearly to death has no defense or excuse."

Polly bit her lip, knowing that he was right, and they *had* done those things in that awful park. But she hadn't let them finish killing the man! She'd even seen he got to the hospital by calling for paramedics!

Molly jumped in.

"Neither is slavery." She fired back.

"Now we are getting to the matter." Konner said quietly. "This isn't slavery." He told them. "This is a form of punishment, similar to incarceration and community service, for those that are redeemable to society."

"And who decides that?" Molly demanded hotly. "One man?"

"In this case." He agreed. "No more was needed. Your guilt was plain before the world. Magic simply verified your chances of being saved as high over the others."

Polly frowned a little; she didn't doubt his word that he'd seen something that night. And with Molly that made some sense, as she wasn't actually a gang member in the first place but simply playing a role, but what about her? She'd been with the gang since its beginning, helping create it before she'd become sickened by the direction it had gone. She'd wanted out, so maybe that was why she'd been chosen? She shivered; she hoped that was the case.

"It is far more accurate than other means, such as they polygraph tests and "psychiatry evaluation." He said the last with a derisive sneer. "Plus, magic is entirely impartial."

Molly sniffed. "Unless whoever's doing the reading is biased."

She pointed out.

"That would be easily disproven by any other magic user." He said dismissively. "Magic leaves a trace of all spells upon the caster and the target."

Molly had no good answer to that and returned to the slave point.

"Once again, you are, in essence, not a slave but a criminal paying penance for her crime. I prefer to see it as someone being rehabilitated to be a productive and useful member of her society instead of a parasite. The principle is not dissimilar to today's justice system. This one differs in only the environment—a comfy house instead of a crowded prison yard and constant education and discipline instead of malingering boredom."

Molly growled. "Punishment should be decided by the court system, not by some yahoo vigilante!"

"If the system was being used the way it had been intended when conceptualized, I would agree." Konner stressed. "But it hasn't. Today's trials are simply showcases for money and power. If a gang is violent and brutal enough it can sway the judges or jurors through threats or put their people under the protection of other members in prison, so they retain that culture of violence and thievery instead of leaving it behind them. Others can simply buy off the judge with their wealth or position in society and leave smiling and happy. What justice is there in that system?" he asked sarcastically.

Molly muttered something foul, but didn't refute the point.

Konner nodded, not exactly smug but pleased.

"Your belief in the justice system itself is surprising." He told her, "but hopeful. Yes, in the way the system should be run you would be in the care of the courts right now, and then being trained in a manner not too dissimilar, I think, then what you are in currently. Let's consider it an experiment to see if my point has validity, hmm?"

"And how would you run the courts?" Molly shot back angrily. "By cutting out the lawyers and jurors and becoming a swinging judge?!"

"No." Konner replied. "That wouldn't be the way to run a court system properly, in my view. I would cut out the showmanship and dishonesty, for certain."

"How would you do that, sir?" Polly asked, partly curious and partly wanting to extend the conversation as she could see it beginning to wind down.

"Ah, that is simply a matter of removing case law and returning solely to Constitutional Law as the sole basis for guilt or innocence." He said.

"But case law is there for those cases that don't fall within the legal definition of any constitutional law." Molly retorted.

"Case law has become a corrupt and overbearing form of illegality that is far removed from whatever it was intended for." Konner replied coldly. "It may once have been intended to *clarify* certain aspects that weren't framed in the legal system arranged by the forefathers, but it has sadly grown into a state that overshadows individual freedoms for its own tyranny. How many innocents have been terrorized in their homes because they willingly gave up the right to defend themselves knowing that they can be sued by those who've wreaked violence against them for hurting them in the process? I refer

to the case last year where Peter Macintyre sued the Palmington family for shooting him with rock salt from a shotgun when he broke into their house and tried to steal their TV and threatened them with a knife. He claimed they had caused permanent emotional trauma and PTSD from the event, even though he broke into their house and the courts awarded him a settlement of two million dollars from the family."

"That is the situation we find ourselves in today. The courts have become a tightly run business looking for the most money from a situation with no caring about actual justice itself."

His anger was palpable in the room and Polly took a step back, wanting to run for the door but terrified of attracting attention to herself.

Molly didn't back down.

"It might seem that way sometimes, and I admit the system ain't perfect, but it is better than having a single man runnin' 'round imposin' his justice."

"Perhaps." He settled back into his chair, steepling his fingers.

"Yet I don't think you are right. This experiment will be the proof of that; when we are finished here, you will have no concept of your old life being right in the slightest, and will be better for the experience."

His hand hit the picture of the old suffragette on the headline. Seeing this he deflated and acquired a thoughtful look.

"That is all." He said in a distracted air, completely unlike him in every way.

As they turned away they saw him absorbed in the image of the kindly old woman with fierce focus, writing notes on a legal pad of whatever he saw in the story.

Out in the hall Molly turned to Polly. "He's worried about this." She said.

Polly nodded her head, she'd never seen him so worked up. Not even when he'd become livid at Molly's insults in the park had he expressed such angry resolve. She shivered.

"I don't want to be in the shoes of whoever crosses him." She agreed.

"Hey, congrats on getting your voice back, by the way. We should celebrate with some cake or something." Molly grinned. "What do ya say?"

"Cake would be great." Polly agreed happily.

They went to the kitchen and found a recipe that Polly liked. As complicated as it was, they were able to find every ingredient called for; it had become a fact of life that Konner's house could be counted on to have literally everything in existence if searched. It might not be there the first time you looked, but they would always find it the second time.

"I wonder if it would do the same for my car keys." Molly had joked.

Once they had the cake in the oven the two women relaxed around the table and talked like old friends that hadn't seen each other in years. Polly learned Molly had been to university and majored in Law and liked jogging on the weekends and Molly listened politely as Polly told of her meeting with Greg in high school and her time as the

tennis star.

When the cake finished baking she found lemon frosting and the two had the cake decorated and cut before the clock struck five.

Dinner proved a quiet affair, with Konner failing to appear in the dining room. Polly ended up bringing him his meal in the library where he had several volumes lying open in front of him and his pen whizzing across his note paper. Polly could guess who the articles were about, and she left.

"He's determined." Polly said quietly when she got there. "Something about this has upset him. I mean, can't people die by accident, right?"

"Apparently he doesn't think so." Molly said. "And if she had power of some sort in their society, then that meant she most likely had some sort of enemy out there. With enemies out there, the chances of a hit increase and the likelihood of an accident decrease."

She acquired a thoughtful look. "You know, we might be able to use this. Not sure how, yet, but..." she trailed off.

Polly thought about the situation. "Well, if she's rich enough that might be the case of being robbed, but this sounds more like a professional hit, if they took the effort of making it seem an accident. But if that's the case, we've got to be careful, if someone starts investigating that which others want hidden then they tend to silence that person, and anyone connected with him that he might have talked too."

"Leaving us targets." Molly finished. "Which is why," she said, looking Polly in the eye, "I'll be starting to train you in self-defense."

"If you do that though, won't Konner suspect you aren't who you claim to be?" Polly asked worriedly.

"Probably, if I was dumb enough to train you when we do our PE hour. Instead I'll train you after we get off for the evening. In my room so that we won't be disturbed."

Polly thought about it, then gestured to herself ruefully. "Do you got any karate moves for four hooves and a butt the size of a car?" she asked.

Molly chuckled. "No, but we might be able to come up with a couple of moves for that. The upper body grabs and tosses should work fine, though."

This time Polly didn't hesitate.

"Let's do it." She said.

"Okay. This is how this works." Molly said. They were in her room, just after they'd moved all the furniture to the corners leaving a clear space for them to work with.

"We'll start with the basics at each step of the way. I'm guessing you weren't taught to fight in the gang?"

Polly shook her head. "Greg never showed me." She said quietly. "He said I wouldn't need to know for the job as he'd be right there with the others. But in reality..." she blushed and fell silent.

Molly said nothing, though her eyes took on a pitying cast. "Well, we're going to change that. By the time we finish, you should be able to handle yourself in a fight."

Polly nodded determinedly. "I'm ready." She said bravely.

Molly didn't go into the throws or bends right away though. To

Polly's surprise she told her to practice her breathing first. Once she was satisfied that Polly was taking steady, regular breaths she had her practicing making a fist. Clucking over the position of her thumb inside her fist and laying it on top.

"So, you don't break your thumb when fighting." Was all she would say on it.

Their two hours were over before they realized, and Polly bid her good night.

"Remember, this is just between us girls." Molly warned.

"Don't have to tell me twice." Polly said fervently.

"All right. You have a good night. See you in the morning." She cracked a yawn.

"You too." Polly said warmly.

After brushing her teeth, she went back to her sinfully comfortable bed and snuggled under the covers. The last thought to pass her mind that night was how lucky she was.