

The Solicitor

Nor was the loss of the apparent friend of Konner's the latest unusual event to happen. Not three days after there came a ring at the front door.

The sound was so unexpected that Polly didn't know what to make of it at first.

"Polly, would you kindly answer the door?" came the shout from the library, and it at last clicked what the sound meant.

Before she made it out of the kitchen though, Molly grabbed her arm.

"Remember," she said in an urgent, low voice. "That anyone callin' on him is likely to be one of *his* kind. They aren't goin' to help us out of this mess, but they might squeal on us. Be careful."

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

She hurried down the hall, her quick trotting stride letting her cover the distance much faster than she was used too. In moments she'd answered the door.

Outside there was a well-dressed, portly man with a big handlebar mustache, a grey tweed suit, a small hat jammed over his round head, and a slight scowl on his face that brightened into a smile when he saw her.

"Ah, there you are at last!" he said. "I thought the doorbell might be broken."

He seemed to be waiting for her to say something but the sudden shock on seeing another human after so long left her speechless.

He chuckled at her shocked expression.

"Yes, I see what you mean. I mean, no one else in the world can dress as sharp, eh? But still, won't you let me come in? I've got urgent business you know!"

She didn't know, but the man's British accent seemed to give extra weight to his words and she found herself stepping back to let him in.

"That's better." He said, coming inside the parlor. "Here you are, me girl!" he said, passing her his hat and coat. Coming to herself a little she put them on the pegs in the wardrobe.

"Now then, where might I find Konner?" he asked.

"This way. Won't you please follow me?" she asked.

He nodded briskly and motioned for her to go on, taking no notice of the dwarf chandelier with its thousands of flickering lights or the rich paintings and decorations on the wall.

Hmm, I would bet he's been here before, and probably more than once, she guessed.

In the library their warm greeting of one another seemed to confirm that.

"Konner, me boy! Good to see you!" the man said enthusiastically

"It's good to see you, my old friend." Konner returned much more reservedly. "Is there a beverage or refreshment you would like before we begin?"

"No, thank you. Just had a hot toddy at Pearl's, you know! That woman has genuine magic with her drinks." The man smiled.

"Very well. Polly, that will be all." Konner dismissed her.

Polly walked out, all on fire to know what was being said and who this strange visitor was. That he was a friend of Konner's was obvious and she was glad of Molly's advice. That had kept things from becoming awkward, she felt.

In the kitchen she'd relayed what she'd seen and heard to Molly. The cat'taur frowned, thinking.

"It sounds almost like a British Solicitor." She said slowly.

"What's that?" Polly asked.

"Basically a lawyer, but they go and make frequent house calls instead, soliciting business and stuff. I'd heard about it from my friend Julia when we were in school together, her father was one of those British aristocrats that was constantly being visited for some reason or another."

Polly blinked, wondering again what sort of school Molly had gone to.

"It doesn't matter." Molly said at last. "One lawyer's just like another, smile at ya one minute and stab ya cheerfully in the back the next." Her accent became more pronounced, as if unconsciously. Polly thought it had been affected, like a role, but now she thought it might actually be her natural accent.

"I wonder what he's here for." Molly chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully, then cursed as her sharp teeth cut through flesh with ease.

"Dammit, I keep forgetting about that." She cursed as she grabbed a napkin and dabbed her bleeding lip.

She threw it in the trash where a number of red napkins could be found if whatever got tossed in didn't vanish before it hit the bottom.

"Well, he has a lawyer, but is it a mortal lawyer like us, or is it another magic user like him?" Polly asked.

"I don't know." Molly said. "But it could be either, I suppose. There are lawyers I know that wouldn't care if their clients were the devil themselves as long as they pay on time and don't balk at their fees."

Polly sighed in agreement. Not knowing what else they settled into an uncomfortable silence, waiting on the library bell to signal that Polly would be wanted.

For some reason Polly couldn't get comfortable at the table, feeling antsy and restless. She glanced at the time and realized she should be halfway through dusting the Hall of Predators now (so called because over twenty portraits of different carnivores hung on the walls) yet she hadn't started because she was waiting on Konner and the unknown man in the tweed suit.

"I get it." Molly admitted when she commented. "He's got us on this tight as fuck schedule for a while now and we've gotten used to it. Same things happen in prison you know. At least, that's what's supposed to happen, get 'em used to a standard routine and everything falls into place."

"So, he was right in what he said earlier?" Polly asked.

"Of course not!" Molly snapped. "I didn't mean that! No, this is wrong in its entirety, no matter what the bastard claims. We're his slaves right now. We certainly aren't getting paid to do this work."

"But aren't prisoners supposed to be..." Polly began.

"No." Molly interrupted dismissively. "Prisoners are paid for

any work the state asks of them. I think it's at minimum wage, but they are paid. The money is then added to their accounts or placed with their effects until release date, but then they have the money to spend."

Polly frowned, surprised. She'd never studied the penal system in school, despite running the risk of being sent there. She realized now that she should have looked at it harder.

"So, what will that mean for us?" she asked.

"I don't know." Molly replied, her tail switching back and forth irritably. "That's the problem. There's no oversight over him, which is what the justice system is all about. We have no way of seeing that he lets us go or that he's held to a time standard or any standard of conduct while we are in his care. That's why we have the system; to provide controls for those in charge."

"A good idea." A new voice interrupted them. Both women spun around and saw Konner and the solicitor standing in the doorway. Konner had a slight smile playing at his corners while the solicitor was positively beaming.

"Capital! Capital!" he said, "You've reasoned things out nicely, especially about why we created the justice system in the first place. Yet it has become corrupt," he nodded dolefully, as if reciting the greatest tragedy in the world. His expressions made Polly abruptly giggle, he looked so funny!

"But with the system broken beyond repair, how do you repair it?" he asked them. "How can you, ah, reset something when it is in the best interests of those sad few like me who make their living at it for the thing to remain broken? Clients wouldn't hire us if they knew that they'd be found guilty of the principle and we couldn't get them off on a technicality or have us sue someone if they were guilty of other crimes instead. So we let the system remain in its disreputable state year after year and even aid in its decline."

He smiled as if he'd won the lottery. "Then there are those who have the power and the foresight to see something broken and decide not to let it stand, no sir! Mr. Seawright has decided to prove his point that the system, if administered correctly and by upstanding citizens, can have the power to make a difference on the lives of everyone involved..."

"I've seen that." Molly sneered abruptly. "He turned a lotta people into fish!"

The solicitor blinked. "Ah, well, those were those who are irredeemable, weren't they?"

"We wouldn't know until after we'd made the effort." Molly snapped. "But he didn't make the effort, did he?"

Konner's eyes glittered with anger. "We've been through this, and my findings have been verified by other magic users; those lives you've defended were hopeless addicts to violence and death, and would soon have seen blood running in their turf until I came along. Even if they were put into the current system, there were technicalities and loopholes galore a talented lawyer like Mr. Simmons here could easily exploit and have them back on the streets after pocketing his fee. "

"All too true, I'm afraid." Mr. Simmons agreed.

"Well, I've decided not to let that stand. With appropriate management, we can make the city a safer place to live for anyone. Already the neighborhood and park have become far safer with the

gang's mysterious disappearance. The cops have investigated the neighborhood heavily, suspecting other gang activity, but the gangs themselves have no clue what happened, other than an entire armed and violent group have vanished completely. That's got them scared, and there are signs that they are moving far more cautiously these days. Muggings, break-ins and "turf violence" have fallen to a ten-year low. With only three more examples made of the other two gangs I should be able to have this city at a crime rate comparable to a small town of a couple hundred people."

Molly laughed. "That's impossible." She stated unequivocally. "No matter how good you *think* you are, crime will still happen in a city this large. No cop in the world would give you odds on stopping all crime."

Konner smiled. "Would you like to make a little wager on that?" he asked softly.

"Now, now." The solicitor barked. "There isn't to be any form of gambling or other games of risk or questionable activity while these girls are in your care Konner. You've written as much into your contract and I will hold you to it."

Konner nodded. "You're right, of course." He said. "I got carried away. Forgive me."

"That's all right." Mr. Simmons said jolly once more. "We've got it sorted, but by Jove! I wouldn't want to wager against you on any score, Mr. Seawright. You have an unusual tendency to pull off any task you set your mind to. I, for one, have no doubt you will accomplish your stated goals to have this city with the lowest crime rate in the world for a population over six thousand. But I wonder how long that will last?" he mused.

"What do you mean?" Konner asked sharply. "I intend to prove this as a viable fact of life. It is an early step, I admit, but it will go a long way to preparing for our eventual end plan."

"Imagine it." Simmons murmured.

"Well, I only meant that we don't have just the usual non-magic crimes to worry about. Speaking of which, you are perfectly clear on your instructions?"

"Yes." Konner said, his face becoming a smooth mask giving nothing away. "It will be followed."

"It's a right pity, it is. But as you're the only fellow who has the remotest chance of being able to talk him down, it's only fair that you go, you know. I'm sorry to put it on you, I really am, but if there's any hope for him, it's you. Otherwise, well... he'd have been glad to know it was you that did it."

Konner nodded. Polly and Molly glanced at each other, intense curiosity in their gazes.

Simmons made his farewells and started towards the door. Polly hurried after him at a raised eyebrow from Konner and pulled his hat and coat from the wardrobe and gave it back to him.

"Thank you my dear." Simmons smiled winningly.

Polly hesitated for only a moment before reaching out and touching his jacket.

"Wait." She pleaded.

"Yes?" Simmons asked with a raise eyebrow.

"Please, tell me how long this is going to last, if you know." She begged. "Neither of us want to be here and he won't say anything."

Simmons looked friendly and patted her hand.

"Don't you worry about it." He spoke comfortingly. "You'll be here only as long as needed. I've never known Konner to go back on his word to anybody, and in a way, you're pretty lucky to have him. He'll never give up on something he believes in. He believes this will work, and he's going to do everything he can to make it work."

"But at what cost to us?" she asked in a hushed whisper.

"I won't say it will be easy." Simmons said. "But in the end, you will be a better person for it. I assure you, you are in very good hands here. Now, I must be off. Good day to you, miss, er, um...?"

"Pauline." Polly said quietly. "Just...Pauline."

She would never give either of these monsters the chance to strike at her family...at Emily. She'd promised herself that nothing she'd do would impact them and she still intended to keep that promise.

Simmons left with raised eyebrow and a jolly smile on his thoughtful face.

For about a third of a second Polly had the mad thought to run outside, now that the door was open, and escape. Run as fast and far as she could and get help for Molly. Yet she'd have to get by the solicitor, and she didn't doubt he would stop her, or Konner would find her before she got very far and what would he do then? What would be her punishment for trying to escape her, she snorted, recovery?

With a heavy heart she closed the door. The smooth brown wood with its diamond insets seemed so normal, so relaxed. She wanted to puke. This house was a prison, and no matter how nice it looked it would always be that to her.

She turned to find Konner leaning casually by the entrance with a sardonic smile on his face. Her hearts leaped pounded like the pistons of an engine. How much had he overheard, and what would he do?

"Well," he said at last, breaking the silence. "That will be that then. Polly, I suggest you go to the kitchen and get some food for yourself and plenty of water. You won't need to take anything with you if you have them here. I'll be along in thirty minutes to see how you are getting on. There's a saddle here in this chest for you." He pointed. "Please see that it is on and you are ready to go at that time."

Without another word he spun around and walked to the library leaving Polly standing speechless.

A sonorous chime from the unusual clock got her tail in gear, and she headed for the kitchen to eat. She wasn't sure what was going to happen, but she did know that she wanted to be well prepared for every possibility.

Molly besieged her with questions when she got there.

"I don't know what is going on." Polly told her. "I really don't, but he wants me fed and watered before...whatever happens. Oh! And I'm supposed to put on a saddle that's in the chest in the hall for me."

Molly looked alarmed, though she didn't let that stop her from making Polly a big lunch very quickly.

As Polly ate, Molly took to pacing the floor, her claws clicking on the fine hardwood. Her eyes were bright and fierce while her tail

twitched side to side like a cat considering its best options for mischief.

"This might be an opportunity." She said aloud. "If we both go then we might find an opportunity to escape. We can get to the station and get some help to bag this bozo and bring him in."

Polly said nothing, but she didn't think the entire Vanadite City police force could bring Konner in. How could guns and riot shields bring in someone who could turn you into a fish or bunnies simply for annoying him? He might go in, she reasoned, simply because he felt it was his duty to obey the law, but she couldn't picture him behind prison bars for very long.

He's right, it wouldn't be long before his lawyer was able to get him off on a technicality or loophole of the law and he'd be back on the streets again, and this time he'd be coming after us! Or would he?

A new fear came to her; he might simply vanish. His house was supposed to be impossible to find by anyone he (apparently) didn't invite. He could simply stay here and the police wouldn't be able to find him and then who would turn them back to human? She didn't want to have a horse for a butt her entire life!

"I'm not sure that's a good idea." She said at last. "He might simply stay home, you know? How would we get turned human again? He's the only sorcerer or wizard or whatever he is that we know of, and you can bet he wouldn't turn us back again if we escaped. Like he said, we don't have anywhere else to turn to."

"Magic aint' the world, sister." Molly told her fiercely. "We can escape, I'm sure of it. There's bound to be others, but that isn't important. We would be able to make him turn us back when we have him back in the system."

"Back? You've captured guys like him before?" Polly asked, realizing as she did so that she'd finished her sandwich.

"Well, not exactly." Molly admitted as they left the kitchen with the plates still sitting on the table. "But we can do it." She added confidently.

"I'm not as sure as you are." Polly admitted fearfully. "If we fail, then we're stuck as taur people for the rest of our lives. If he's held to a contract like what Mister Simmons hinted at, then we have a chance to get back to being human again, long though it might be."

In an undertone she added, "And I can see Emily again."

She froze as she realized she said it out loud. "Uh, I mean, well...um" she stammered fearfully, she hadn't wanted to tell Molly about her sister either.

"It's all right." Molly soothed. "Remember, Greg had boasted to me how he'd managed to get you under his thumb. The story of Emily checked true, I'd been on that case when it happened and knew she'd been brought home safe and how."

Something struck Polly as off about that, but she didn't get a chance to ask for Molly had opened the chest and whistled in awe.

Underneath the lid in the space that seemed too small for it, gleamed a beautiful leather saddle. Once they'd pulled it out of the chest Polly had a better look at what she'd be wearing and couldn't suppress a gasp of awe.

The soft leather gleamed from years of loving care and use, the

polished metalwork flashing in the light. It had a tall horn in the front and long strings of leather hanging here and there waiting patiently for the gear they held.

"Well, it's pretty, that's for sure." Molly grunted. "Bit surprised that it's western style though. With that dick I thought it'd be English."

Polly frowned, wondering what on earth she was talking about.

"Oh," Molly caught her look. "Sorry. Guess you weren't a horse-girl as a kid, eh? No matter. A Western saddle is more comfortable for long rides, has saddlebags and other attachments for carrying gear, and always includes a saddle horn of some sort at the front. An English saddle doesn't have any of that, and is usually hornless, although some so have a sort of raised hump in the front and back that lets the rider sit more secure."

Polly shook her head at the new depths she was discovering, and grasped it. The saddle was incredibly light, she noticed as she went to lay it on her back.

"Wait!" Molly cried, lunging forward and catching the saddle. Polly jerked it back in surprise and nearly dropped it.

"You need a saddle blanket first, or you'll rub yourself raw." Molly pointed out.

Polly looked around for one and found it on a shelf connecting the stand's legs together. It was black with silver workings on the golden edges. It lay flat on her back with the comfort of silk but the sturdiness of wool. Molly then placed the saddle on her back, a noticeable weight but not much different than carrying a nearly-empty backpack.

Molly bustled around her, tightening the straps (what a weird feeling!) and adjusting everything just so.

"There, that's the best I can do." She admitted at last.

"Thanks Molly." Polly said.

"Your welcome."

Konner came out a short time later and looked over the work, double-checking the straps with surprising familiarity; Polly hadn't pegged him for a horse person, but then maybe she wasn't the first centaur he'd had in the house?

"Very good." Konner said at last. "We shouldn't have any problems on the...where do you think you're going?" this was directed at Molly who stood by with a pair of coats, one for Polly in dark blue and another in a purple or maroon color that Polly thought looked cute on her fur.

"Out with Polly." Molly said in a tone that indicated she wouldn't be broken if he disappeared somewhere along the way.

Konner chuckled. "I won't have need of you this trip, and neither will Polly." He told her. "So long as she is with me, there is no danger. Besides, I expect you'll try to run off the moment the opportunity presents itself, and that is a complication I do not need today."

"But what if I run off while you're gone?" Molly asked sarcastically, but her eyes shot a worried look at Polly.

"I don't think I have much to worry from that regard." Konner said after a moment's hesitation. "It's been clear to me that you would have tried escapes several times by now if you weren't worried by Polly here. Such loyalty and friendship is admirable but being out

in the open might give you ideas, and that is a complication that I don't need today at all. You will be staying in the house, and I have no doubt that you will be here when we return."

"Don't worry," he added in a gentler tone. "Your friend here will return to you."

Molly looked ready to argue, but Polly spoke up softly.

"Don't worry Molly, I'll be fine. I'll bring back a full report of what happened."

She could have kicked herself; that was as good as telling him that she wasn't just an enforcer! But he sighed.

"I see, it is the blood you are interested in and not friendship then? I'm disappointed. We'll have to try and work on that nasty habit of yours a bit more strenuously when I return."

Polly looked apologetically at Molly, not sure what else to do or say.

Molly watched them leave the door with slitted eyes, her muscles bunched as they left. If she'd intended to leap out the door after them it wasn't going to be, the door closed so fast behind Polly she thought she might have lost a tail hair or two.

Immediately she found herself surrounded by a dense white fog, similar to what she'd seen the night she'd been taken.

"A bit late in the afternoon for fog, isn't it?" she asked without thinking, frowning around her.

"Not exactly fog." Konner replied distractedly. "But a sight block spell. That way you won't be able to report your exact location to anyone. Not that they could find my house even if they stood right in front of it, but still it doesn't hurt to take care."

"I see." Polly said neutrally, though inside she felt like cursing.

"But how am I to see where I am going?" she asked.

"You won't have to." Konner replies. "All you have to do is follow my instructions. Now, forward." And with that he tapped her flank, jolting her into action.

Polly felt like uttering a thousand curses as she walked uncomfortably into the formless wall, not daring to look behind her at the now vanished apartment.