

Wizard's Duel

Polly jolted to a stop in surprise when he spoke suddenly. "Stop! We are here."

She looked around and saw nothing. She twisted back and saw him peering over her shoulder intently, studying something only he could see.

After remaining silent for long minutes, he spoke, half to himself. "It seems the council is right after all. He's gone too far this time, I suspect. He doesn't care who he hurts anymore, or who sees. A pity, I rather liked him in his younger days, but he isn't going to listen to a summons or edict, even if I am the one delivering it. But," he added with a sigh, "I guess I must try at least, for his sake. Forward Polly," he said, resuming a normal tone.

Polly obeyed almost without thinking. In three steps the bubble she'd traveled in vanished like soap suds. On either side of them sprang nicely appointed houses, painted and well cared for, with manicured lawns and brightly colored gardens. It looked like any upscale neighborhood done in the fifties, but Polly could see the differences immediately. Beside the modern vehicles in the drive, every house had thick iron bars on the windows, every door had a locked iron screen and appeared to be heavier than any door she'd ever seen, perhaps even solid all through! Heavy steel shutters could be seen behind every barred pane, shut and probably locked.

This place looks under siege, worse than anything our gang ever did! Polly thought wonderingly, but she saw no signs in any yard announcing the home for sale, and no hint of damage could be found anywhere.

It was as if the people were terrified, but they either wouldn't or couldn't leave.

Small chills went down her spine and her ears rotated constantly left and right, searching for any warning of attack. Behind her, the wizard directed her down the cul-de-sac and into a shady driveway. Here the grass looked uncut and wild, in stark contrast to the neat lawns on every other house. The two-story sitting here didn't look all that different from the others, except that it obviously needed a fresh coat of paint. It appeared, though, that the owner preferred to spend his energies in his garden; the bushes were clean and bloomed with flower, and everywhere she looked were human statues, walking or running through the yard. There had to be thirty at least, and they were of all walks of life; Polly saw perhaps a dozen child-sized statues running through the yard or swinging casually on a rope swing that hung motionless in the air. A pair of cops stood as stern sentinels to the entrance, their faces carved so life-like that Polly fancied she could see sweat on one of them, a young

girl who looked puzzled and concerned.

Hmm, the sculptor who lives here is very talented. Polly thought, wondering why they would be bothering him in the first place.

Her rider dismounted and strode to the door. Knocking seven times loudly, he waited for the span of two breaths, then knocked fourteen times in rapid succession.

A window above them slammed upwards, echoing in the quiet street. A wrinkled face blinked owlshly down at them, evidently awakened from some sleep as his nightcap dangled off his head and he wore a brown nightshirt.

"What do you want?" he asked grumpily at them. He glanced around at the wall of fog and smiled slightly. "Not bad sonny, but we are safe to talk until the sun comes up."

"I know, old friend." Konner called up. "The sleep spell is a marvelous touch, very effective."

"Konner! You young rascal!" the old man sounded delighted. "Is that you?! It has been too long."

"Yes, it has been long." Konner called up, a touch of relief in his eyes. "I've traveled some distance carrying messages for you. Would you mind having a nice cup of tea or coffee with me?"

The old man's demeanor changed immediately. It became cold and suspicious, the effect stretching his face until he looked like a wincing Lucifer picture.

"Konner doesn't bear messages for anyone! Who are you?" he called in a raspy voice.

Konner's relief vanished. "It is I, Konner. There is no other that I'm aware of. Come down and verify it is I, or cast your spell so we may dispense with the suspicion."

The old man raised his hand and muttered some words. To Polly on the ground nothing seemed to happen. But Konner's eyes tightened, and the old man's voice railed from above.

"Imposter! Liar! You may have managed to take Konner's form, but you won't trick me so easily!"

"For the last time, I am Konner, Donald." Konner's voice began to sound weary and hopeless. "You've seen for yourself. I was approached by the council to deliver their warning after your indiscretions here because it was hoped that I might be able to talk you down from the precipice you find yourself standing on. Your dementia is getting stronger, and you need help. Won't you let me help you, as you once risked everything to help me?"

"That...that was a bad affair, wasn't it?" Confusion and doubt crept into the reedy voice. "You and the rest of 'em kids... there was a fight to get them out, wasn't there?"

"Yes, and you led the charge to get everyone you could out." Konner said encouragingly. "You are remembering much. Won't you try to remember some more?"

"No!" the old man turned to a petulant child. "You are just

like the others, clanking around at night, driving your loud cars up and down the street with their headlights on, shouting at each other over this and that. Their foul brats running and giggling and tramping through my beautiful garden! I won't have it! You leave an old man in peace, and he'll leave you in peace!"

"But that is against the council rules." Konner called up.

At the mention of the council, the old man's face darkened with wrath, and his beady eyes glinted in his face, which had been muddled and somewhat friendly before, but now acquired a brutish, wild cast.

"Fool!" the old man screamed, spray spitting from his lips as he leaned so far out of the window that Polly feared he would fall. "Council pet! Ass! Bastard! I will not come down or answer your damn message! The council can go to blazes, and so can you!"

From his outstretched hand a ball of sickly green flame appeared and darted through the air like a sparrow on the wing.

Polly screamed in terror, turning to run but she slammed against some invisible force that held her fast. The fireball dimmed and died long before it reached them, vanishing like a puff of smoke.

"I will thank you not to terrorize my servant." Konner said, his hard-edged voice thick with anger, "and to pick your fights more carefully; I am more powerful than you."

"No one is more powerful than the great Donald Crabpott!" he directed another spell at them. This time Polly, terrified beyond reason and seeking any sort of shelter she could find, dove for safety behind his slender frame. She didn't dare raise her head or risk peeking over his shoulder, but cast herself down on the sod as if she could disappear into the grass and be safe.

When at last she raised her eyes, the battle was in full swing, and she trembled at the sight of it. Lightnings darted down from a cloudless sky, or sprang from the men to meet and explode in midair. Fire, too, was used and it flickered and flared bright for one moment, before guttering into nothing the next. Other magic appeared briefly; a spear appeared from nothing and hurtling towards Konner became a silver serpent that slithered up the air and opened its jaws to bite, but became a host of bees that buzzed angrily and raced back towards them, until the swarm turned into a bouncing rubber ball that rolled away harmlessly into the brush.

Through it all, the wizard never lost his focus; Polly marveled at the concentration it must have taken. Every motion made was deliberate and sure, the rapid series of attacks and counters seemed to be slowed to a stop, analyzed, prioritized, and dealt with instantly and in no strain.

It served as a marked contrast to Crabpott. His mouth was bared in a rictus of a snarl, his mad eyes alight with wrath and

his limbs jerked and twitched like palsy in the grip of his passion.

Throughout the fight, he'd been taking shots at the roof and mid-level, below the window where Crabpott stood. Now, after brushing off a weird, hopping frog, he stepped forward and his eyes glowed in the night. In a loud, ringing voice he shouted "Break!"

With a tremendous groan and shriek, the front of the house collapsed, spilling the old man onto the ground.

Before he had a chance to pick himself up, gain his feet or cast again, the dark figure standing above her smote him with a fire brand, turning his body to ash.

Polly stared in stunned disbelief at where the body had been. Then she looked up to see Konner offering his hand to her, his face a steel mask. Reluctantly, she accepted his help in standing up.

"You killed him!" she said disbelievingly the moment she gained her feet.

"How else did you imagine this fight would turn out?" he asked curiously, "with him as a rabbit? He could turn himself back before we blinked."

"But he was helpless! He might have surrendered!" she protested.

He sighed. "You do not understand, I see. This is unexpected, given your past associations. He would not have surrendered, and striking then guaranteed a swift victory than chance defeat at his hands later. Who knows what might have happened to you then? A lovely addition to his garden, no doubt." He pointed at the statues.

A new horror overcame her, and she gaped at the yard, looking intently at the faces as if to look for signs of life. Her heart broke as she gazed at the child-statues she saw.

They are so young! She wept.

"Fortunately," he muttered, not paying attention to her and focusing on things she could not see, "the sleep spell means no one witnessed the battle. That gives me some time to work on freeing these people without interruption."

Polly turned to him, hope springing in her heart as she suddenly hoped that he could do as he said, but he had already started chanting, waving his hands in a complex form.

With a noise like the cracking of arthritic knuckles, the statues started to stir. The gray of their granite bloomed in bright colors as people moved more freely. Here and there someone rasped a question, or a child cried out in terror, searching for their mother or father, or asking what was going on.

"Sleep." The master said at last, when the last speck of gray had left the people and they were starting to move freely again. In that instant, like puppets cut from the string, they crumpled to the grass and did not move, except for the steady

rise and fall of their chests.

Polly hurried over to them, pulling victims out of uncomfortable or dangerous positions and doing her best to make them comfortable on their cold, dewy beds. The children she gathered towards the center, to leave them more protected while she glared daggers at the man watching her efforts with curious eye, as if he were viewing the whole thing from the stands of a theater, or on a television.

When she'd at last organized the people as best she could (without knowing why she was moving them in the first place, or how she'd organize them at all), the master moved over each person, speaking quietly with his first three fingers touching their foreheads. Polly waited for them to wake up, but they did not stir and seemed like the statues they once were.

When the last person had been tended, he stepped back to the path, and with a quick glance at the lightening heavens, pointed away south and spoke three words so softly that Polly could just make them out, though they sounded like so much nonsense.

But at their utterance, the people thinned and faded until no trace remained on the grass in the dawn.

"Now..." he began, but he stopped.

Polly had seen the little boy in front of her vanish and her heart had gone cold before blazing hotter than she'd ever felt in her life, hotter even than when she watched her gang transformed in front of her eyes. She found herself beside the wizard in an instant, her fist falling in a savage blow that shut him up and hurled him off his feet. Her cheeks were soaked with freshening rivulets and her fists shook as she blearily watched him regain her feet.

"What did you do to them!!!" she howled furiously, her tail lashing sideways in anger. "You've killed them! You monster! You Bastard! I'll kill you! I'll kill you myself!"

"Enough." He commanded calmly, his cheek turning an angry red, yet he didn't move to touch it or heal it, nor did he seem angry at her outburst, except for his flashing eyes. "I have *not* killed them, as you fear. They are unharmed and are waking up now in a park with no memory of the old man or us. It will be quite a mystery for the police, but there won't be a single link to this place. I admire your passion for others, and forgive your outburst this time. But you will not strike me again, or I will cast a spell on you unlike any other, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes." she signed, partly mollified, but the anger would not go away, and reluctantly she presented the saddle to him.

He mounted her gingerly, sensing her continuing anger, and tapped her gently with his feet. Walking forward, she turned back a moment later to see the house quietly crumbling to dust behind them. Before they had made it to the fog that beckoned to them, she saw a shady vacant lot amongst the neatly manicured

neighborhood with a small white real-estate sign mounted near the street.