

Aftermath

Back at the mansion, they found Molly standing as close to the entrance as she dared, practically stiff with worry and anticipation. As they came in and she saw the mark on the wizard's cheek and Polly's grim face, she gasped and loosed a low growl.

The master had barely managed to clear his leg from the saddle when Polly felt her hand seized and she found herself dragged behind Molly, the cat girl fluffed and snarling as a mother cat with her kitten facing a bemused bear. Polly blinked in shock at Molly's incredible strength, and rubbed her stinging wrists, before trying to get Molly's attention.

Molly jabbed her finger at Konner's breastbone like a spear, while he looked at her warily.

"What did you do to her!" she howled.

Relaxing somewhat, with a small smile springing to his otherwise stern face, he spoke with no more concern or emotion than if they were discussing Rome's fall.

"I did nothing to her," he told Molly, "either before or after she struck me. Our unpleasant business upset her, understandably so, though I had expected her to be more experienced in such dark matters. Very unexpected."

He turned his piercing brown eyes on her, as if reassessing his knowledge of her. Polly shuddered; it felt as if he'd stripped her of cloth and skin and her innermost secrets had been laid bare. She resisted the urge to cover herself with her arms again.

"No matter." The master said at last, dismissing his curiosity. "It isn't important to me. Your charge is unharmed and will not be punished for breaking the rules."

He turned to leave, evidently thinking the conversation at an end, but Molly thought differently.

"Polly wouldn't hit you without good reason, not that there's much needed, but what did you do!" she demanded, stepping forward and seizing his wrist.

She snapped back and flew across the room as if thrown by a giant, crumpling against the wall and sliding to the floor in a heap, dazed.

Polly flew to her side, almost skidding on the slick floor, her hearts pounding wildly in terror for her friend.

She felt her breathing and nearly collapsed in relief. She drew the human half into gentle embrace, raising her arm to ward off any further attack.

The master stood carved from stone, waiting patiently for Molly to recover. Polly felt her push her grip away.

"I'm all right," she said softly. "Just a bit sore."

Polly breathed a sigh of relief and helped Molly regain her

feet.

Once they were standing the master spoke to them, and they listened intently.

"I am sorry for smashing you so hard." He told them, "But I will not allow further assaults on my person." He said coldly. "Polly I could forgive, but you have no such excuse. I will consider the matter settled, unless you persist. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir." Polly said quickly, squeezing Molly's arm warningly.

"Yes sir." Molly agreed, her voice thick with pain and anger.

"I will accept that for now." He sighed, waving his hand.

Molly gasped in surprise, touching her ribs gingerly and then more firm when they evidently failed to pain her.

"Good." Konner said. "You are both released from PE tonight. It has been...difficult on us all. I will be in the library, but please see that neither of you disturb me for the rest of the evening. I will see you in the morning."

And with that he strode to the library doors and shut them firmly behind him.

Polly watched him go with a thoughtful look. She might have imagined it, but she thought that he might be in some pain. She'd seen much the same thing on those that had come to help victims of the gang after she'd surreptitiously called for help.

"What happened out there?" Molly asked urgently, breaking her train of thought.

"Come on." Polly said. "I'll tell you in my room."

"And he killed him, just like that?" Molly asked in hushed tones. She sat on the end of Polly's bed while Polly took the head herself, lying on it with her torso upright.

"Yes." Polly nodded. "I'd charged him then for killing the old man, but he told me," she screwed her voice into a rough approximation of Konner's deep voice, "'He would not have surrendered, and striking then guaranteed a swift victory than chance defeat at his hands later.'"

"That's no excuse." Molly said hotly. "That's murder, and he knows it! You don't strike unarmed men!"

"I think his point was that even weaponless, the old man had his magic, and so could never be considered unarmed." Polly said quietly.

"Don't tell me your defending him!" Molly said incredulously.

"No! I mean, maybe? I don't know!" Polly shouted in anguish. "I don't know! He was trying to kill us, or turn us to stone forever! His mind was clearly gone and he was using magic against us! He turned *children*, children Molly!, into stone!"

Molly was silent for a moment while Polly heaved like she'd run a marathon. Then she tenderly hugged her and Polly felt tears come to her eyes as the events from the day overcame her delicate self control at last and she sobbed into her shoulder.

"They were so y-young!" she sniffed. "That boy couldn't have been more than s-six! And he just vanished in front of me, like he was s-some ghost!"

"Well, Konner did say that they were waking up elsewhere without a clue as to what happened." Molly soothed.

"Do-do you believe him?" Polly hiccuped.

"In this case, I do." Molly said. "Not only did he not have a reason to lie, but I don't think he'd kill without a cause or reason. He's not that sort."

Polly nodded, wiping her tears on the back of her hand.

"Been silly." She said at last.

"No, you haven't." Molly insisted, "You were concerned about the fate of the kids, and the other people that were trapped in predicaments worse than we were. There's nothing to be ashamed of there!"

"I just felt so helpless." Polly admitted. "I spent more time hugging the ground and wanting to disappear than doing anything."

"And what could you have done? Seriously?" Molly asked.

"They were using magic for Christ's sake. There was *nothing* you could have done. And it's time for you to stop and realize that to yourself."

"I will." Polly said. "It will take a while, but eventually I will."

"Thatta girl." Molly said encouragingly. "Well, it's getting late, and I suspect tomorrow is going to be very busy for us. You need to get some sleep."

A sudden fear came over Polly, the crushing weight of loneliness pressed on her so that she could barely breath.

"Don't go!" she gasped. "I'm-I'm sure it's not time to sleep yet!"

Molly looked back startled. What she read in her gaze Polly couldn't guess, but she came back and settled beside her.

"Sure hun." She said uncharacteristically gently. "I'll stick around. Why don't you just rest though. Tell me something about...about Emily, hmm? What is she like?"

"Em?" Polly said, feeling protective of her sister but too afraid of driving Molly away by a direct refusal.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked suspiciously.

"She gives you strength, doesn't she?" Molly asked instead.

Polly nodded slowly. "Yes." She said simply.

"Must be nice, having a sister. All I had when I was growing up were three brothers, all of them older than me. The mischief we used to get into!" she stopped and chuckled. "Well, if you don't want to talk about your sister yet, I'll tell you a little about my brothers. Okay?"

Polly smiled, feeling the tension go from her shoulders.

"Well, there's Tommy, my oldest brother. We used to call him beanpole because he was so doggone skinny, but there wasn't more brilliant mind in the house. He could look at any problem and figure out the solution before we even recognized there was a problem there." She smiled in fond remembrance. "He's the one that came up with the caper, saw the difficulties and figured out how to overcome them. Then Johnny, the youngest brother, would talk us into doing it. Johnny was one slick-talking devil. Heart of gold though, would give you the shirt off his back if you needed it, but he could sell the devil red paint if he put his mind to it."

She sighed and shifted slightly. Polly found her attention waning as she struggled to stay awake.

"Jimmy, my second brother, was kind of the strongman of the group. He and I were the most athletic of our clique, and we could do things the others never could. You wouldn't know it to look at me, but in our younger days I was one of the bigger kids, though I was right between Jimmy and Johnny. One time we stole one of my momma's pies off the window pane. Another we got back at Connie for picking on the new girl in school. Oooh! THAT was a lot of fun. Served the stuck-up bitch right to come home covered in mud and dirt and ruining her momma's nice threads." She snickered.

Polly managed a small smile, but she began losing the thread of the story, her eyelids grew heavy and her head dipped forward. The abyss yawned before her and she stepped off the edge and fell fast asleep while Molly talked.