

The Warning

"Polly, we are going to be experiencing some guests tonight, so please make sure the house is in good condition." Konner announced unexpectedly a day later.

Polly looked up from where she was depositing his morning water and toast.

"Huh?" she asked cluelessly.

Konner chuckled, "We are expecting guests tonight." He told her again. "Some important ones, so please see that the house is in good condition. On your return to the kitchen, please have Molly come see me when you are both finished with your breakfast. I will be done with mine at that time."

He bent his head to his work, the pen scratching across the paper with steady, deliberate motions.

Polly went back to the kitchen with questions swirling in her brain. Who were these guests that were showing up tonight? How did Konner know them? Would they be sympathetic to them or coldly amused?

Inside the double doors she found Molly just putting the final touches on breakfast: a steaming filet of cod and a bowl of strawberries.

"There you are!" Molly said, catching sight of her. "C'mon! This stuff isn't going to eat itself!"

"It looks good enough that it would if it could" Polly laughed. Molly's cooking was excellent. If she ever left the force Polly felt she could open a five star restaurant.

Polly relayed the news about the company and Konner's summons as they ate.

"Guests, eh?" Molly said, chewing thoughtfully on a bite. "I guess they are here about that wizard you guys beat the other day."

Polly nodded. "What do you think will happen?" she asked.

"I hope they hang him." Molly snarled. "He still killed a man lying helpless on the ground. That's pretty bad in my book."

"Mine too." Polly agreed quietly, thinking back. "But what will happen to us if they take him away? It sounds like they play for keeps around here Molly."

"So?" the other woman asked.

"So?! So they may decide we're better off as fish ourselves, or dead! They may decide to keep us as slaves." Polly shuddered, her mind rushing to the worst possibility. "They may want us for more than just housework." She finished grimly. "Like Greg would when—never mind. The point is, while I may not like our current status either, it's a lot better than it could be."

"So, what? You don't want to see him punished?" Molly asked incredulously.

"Not if it means staying a centaur for the rest of my life." Polly retorted. "Are you really that comfortable with being half a snow leopard?"

Molly frowned, unable to come against that logic.

"I...suppose you have a point there." She admitted.

"We'll watch and see." Polly said. "If it looks like they might be sympathetic to us, perhaps we can appeal to them to set us free. But I fear they're going to be worse than we can imagine." She shivered. "I'm scared." She admitted softly.

Molly gave her a comforting hug.

"It'll be all right kiddo." She said. "No harm ever came from a little party. You'll see."

Konner gave Molly a list of items that he wanted made for the evening dinner. "You have a little time today to learn these dishes well; I'm cancelling your normal school activities for this duration."

"Understood sir." Molly said. She still sounded like she had a mouth full of rocks, but she no longer actively snarled at him whenever they spoke.

"Good. Polly, you will clean the house. I have a few things to tidy up here in the library to prepare for this evening. I will give you a hand if I have a moment. Until then, please do your best and see that you are dressed in your new attire for this evening."

Polly wondered what he could be talking about: she only had the one blouse and vest.

Konner handed over two sets of clothes. Polly took a peek at hers and saw a midnight-black vest with gold accents over a comfortable and modest white silk blouse.

"That will be all." Konner said. He went back to his desk to work while Polly and Molly left.

Molly spent most of the morning and early afternoon in the kitchen going over the recipes and making a practice dish of each. That left Polly alone to do the vacuuming and dusting.

She set to her task with a will, cleaning the hall spotless. The suits of armor gleamed silver bright under the light of the chandelier, the rugs were beaten and vacuumed, and the wood was given a quick polish.

Once she had the hall done, she made her way to the dinner table where she polished the long wooden rectangle until it shone with a healthy hue. The napkins were neatly folded and the silverware cleaned and laid out neatly. Plates were supplied from the kitchen and the candelabras were lit. Like their cousin in the hall, these also were LED lights instead of real flame, which Polly thought sensible considering the floral arrangements and the sheer number of flammable objects in the house.

As she worked, her mind drifted back to last Thanksgiving, normally a family affair. She might have helped set the table,

or helped her mother clean up, or at least arranged the entertainment afterwards. Instead, she'd remained in her room texting Greg. Of course, he'd been pressuring her to have Thanksgiving at his place, where they could be alone together and share some "quality time", as he called it, together. She'd done her best to duck and dodge his increasingly agitated texts claiming that Emily would ask where she was going, she was stuck watching her for the holiday, her family would be watching, etc. until at last he gave up in disgust and wished her a happy Thanksgiving.

She'd been relieved, but by then the table was set, the family was ready to eat, and she'd even managed to hold up the prayer, which her father hadn't been too happy about. The net result of that night had been angry parents and worst of all, Emily had picked up on everyone's unhappiness and became melancholy and morose and had to be put back on her medication for depression and hyper anxiety disorder.

Polly's cheeks burned with shame while her eyes shimmered with tears; she'd been so embarrassed that Thanksgiving. Now it looked like she'd be spending another Thanksgiving away from her family, and Emily. She wanted so bad to hold her baby sister, to comfort her and keep her safe. If only she could go home!

Polly realized that she'd ended up standing in the hall for ten minutes with wet cheeks. Sniffing irritably, she swept into the kitchen and saw Molly had a small plate out and appeared to be sampling the dishes.

"Need a hand?" she asked.

Molly glanced up at her.

"What happened?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Polly asked.

"You've been crying." Molly accused.

"Just...memories from before." Polly said. "Nothing to worry about, I promise. Now, did you want a helper to check those dishes?"

"Sure. Grab yourself a spoon." Molly said. "I'm not sure what some of these are supposed to taste like anyway, so I can't tell if I've done a bad job or not, but I think they taste all right. Tell me what you think."

Polly tried the first dish, a strange pudding with a slight lemon tang to it that Molly called by a French name. Bouillabaisse.

"It's different." Polly agreed. "But I don't think it tastes that bad. What's next?"

They spent half an hour sampling the two dozen or so dishes that Molly had made. They laughed like old friends, joking at some of the bizarre names, such as the frozen shark meat from Norway called Kaestur hakarl with its surprisingly robust flavor.

As the hour drew near, Konner came into the kitchen. He

looked weary, though he'd had time to change into an immaculate suit, his appearance carefully groomed to the appearance of a CEO of a major company. Yet Polly could see the tiredness in his eyes. She wondered if she imagined the hint of sorrow too.

"Polly, you've done an excellent job with the house." He said. "It looks very clean and orderly. Molly, you've done a good job with the meal. Now, though, it's time for both of you to go get ready. One moment though," he called as they started for the door.

"Molly, I want you to help Polly serve the meal." His voice never changed, but Polly heard the tension behind it. "Neither of you are to be alone in that room at any time. Is that clear?"

Doubt and uncertainty entered Molly's gaze, while Polly could feel her pulse quicken and her breath shorten.

"Are we in danger, sir?" she asked nervously.

"Yes." He said plainly as he looked at her. "Unfortunately, your stories are already widely known in the magic realm, so there is no use simply giving you the night off, or I would. So long as you don't draw attention to yourself, however, I think you should make it through all right. Be warned, however, that most of the people here tonight do not consider you an equal, or even an inferior. You are an object to them; a pawn to move about their boards in a bid for power over each other and me. You told me that I had no compassion," he looked at Polly. "Rest assured that I am far kinder than any you will meet here tonight, with only one or two exceptions."

"And they are?" Molly asked tersely.

"Well, there's my friend Brian Sanderhill." Konner said. "He's what you might call a people person. I've never met anyone who can resist his easy nature or fail to like him. He's sympathetic to my cause and will do his best to look out for both of you on this night, or should something happen to me."

Polly filed the information away later. In a way she was relieved that if Konner should die she wouldn't be hanging in limbo, but she didn't know this Brian Sanderhill at all; what if he turned out to be worse than Konner?

"Another person you might be able to count on is the witch from England, Missus Rosehall. She is an older woman, but well known for her compassion for others. She is one of those that would like to see the magical and non-magical communities exist together in open harmony, though she is practical enough to see the sense in remaining hidden for the foreseeable future."

"The final person is somewhat of an enigma to me." He admitted. "Heather. She's an American as well, but unlike the others she's obsessively secretive. Doesn't like the outside world knowing about wizards and is one of the strongest proponents of remaining hidden. She's not happy that you know about us and would rather you have your memories erased or fully transformed into an animal so that you can't reveal our existence to the outside world. She's sharply against my actions

here and others that may risk premature exposure. However, that being said, she is a firm believer in the rights of the individual and does not tolerate those that abuse their power over others. If she feels that you are being degraded or attacked in any way, she will put a stop to it. She is an exceptionally gifted practitioner, and one of the strongest magics on the council."

Polly and Molly looked at one another, trying to memorize names and hoping they would each be announced in some way so they could recognize who would be who on the table.

"And who should we watch out for?" Molly asked intently.

Polly listened sharply, not wanting to miss a single name.

"Pretty much all the rest." Konner said. "There are fourteen guests in attendance here tonight. However, I will warn you, be especially on your guard with Ernest Von Kraupfman. He is one of the most depraved individuals I've ever known. I suspect he has a normal genetic malady of the brain, for while he is cunning in the extreme, he knows no conscious and has no moral. He will let you know of his interest and assume that you are automatically property to be used by him or disposed of. He cares nothing for those of lesser status or magic than him, seeking only to be near the top. He searches constantly for any trinket or item that will enhance his power. He will be the most likely to try something tonight, I think. The others are not likely to try anything while there are others watching you, and all know they are not welcome in my home unless specifically invited. So you should be safe after they have gone."

"Wonderful." Polly managed faintly. In her head she could see a giggling, drooling face that leered at her.

"Don't worry, doll." Molly said. "I should be able to handle him!" she bared her teeth in a smile that would have made dogs die of fright if they caught sight of it.

"No violence!" Konner snapped. "If something happens you are to do NOTHING! Your very lives will depend upon that. If you attack one of them, then I can do nothing to aid you as they have the right to punish you as they will. That is why it is so important for you to tell either myself or the others I have named the instant something happens. Do so discreetly, if you can, but we will do what we can for you in the room afforded by the rules. If it is blatant, it will be much easier to put a stop to things. In the meantime, I suggest you don't lag during your duties. That may not give them time to react to your presence during the meal."

"Don't count on it." Molly snarled. "It only takes a second to be sexually assaulted or molested!"

"Truth." Konner agreed heavily. "And this group of individuals is difficult in the best of times. Their contempt of non-magical folk is legendary. They are not likely to give you the respect you so richly deserve."

A ghost of a smile flitted across his face. "I wager you

weren't expecting to hear that."

Molly nodded after a pause.

"Well, no matter." Once more he was cold and in control once more. "We have no choice but to host the entire council, so we will do so with dignity and grace. Consider it a test of your etiquette skills that you've learned, if you will. And may luck be with you tonight!"