

The Dinner

Dinner guests began to arrive shortly after six. Polly greeted the first, a large man with a bright red beard. She correctly guessed that this had to be Brian, which Konner quickly proved by embracing the man warmly.

"Brian, it's good to see you."

"It's good to see you. I'm sorry to have been part of that junta that sent you to deal with that mess, but if there would have been anyone to have penetrated his madness, it would have been you."

"I'm just sorry to have failed." Konner said quietly. "He was a good man."

"Yes, well there's more good men out there, fortunately. Now, I'm assuming these enchanting women are the two I've heard so much about?" he smiled at Polly who waited to take his coat, Molly hovering near the door to see if she needed help. Polly felt a bit like what she imagined Emily must feel with an overprotective older sister.

"Yes. Brian, allow me to introduce Pauline and Molly." Konner said.

Brian shook hands with both of them, his swift gaze searching over them.

"Hmm, I see they are farther along than I expected." He said abruptly, startling them. "But yet I sense there's more to both of them than meets the eye. There's secrets yet they hold from you. One to protect the other, and one is protecting a great treasure close to her heart."

Now it was Konner's turn to look startled, then thoughtful.

"Interesting." He murmured.

Polly turned panicked eyes on Molly; how had this man known so much?

"It's all right." Brian soothed. "I'm partially empathic, not telepathic. I can sense secrets and a general knowledge of what they might contain, but not specifics. It's a bit like peeking at someone's mail, you get a sense of what's going on but not the whole picture."

That didn't comfort Polly in the least. She didn't want any of her secrets getting out, and now Emily was in danger of discovery from this man. As fear left her a spark of anger fanned into flame; she vowed never to let this man touch her again in the smallest way, if he tried she'd kick him—*hard*.

Konner and Brian spoke a little longer, inquiring about each other's doings, and Konner spoke of his investigations into the Amulet of Khalifa and other doings that were Greek to Polly's ears.

Another knock on the door silenced the conversation as Polly reached forward and opened the door again.

This time a young witch stood on the stoop. She had long black hair pulled back into a ponytail, exposing a pretty face pulled into a severe expression. Her sharp green eyes glinted like cold gems.

She stepped inside without a word and looked harshly at Polly who felt her instant dislike and drew back, wondering what she could have done to have attracted this woman's ire.

"So, you two are the pet projects of Konners." She nearly barked, her alto voice firm and unyielding in its tone.

"Yes, Heather. This is Pauline and over there by the door glaring angrily at you is Molly."

"I don't care what they're called." She said turning her attentions back to Konner. "You should never have brought humans into our circle. If they were guilty you should have finished the job and turned them into fish or emptied their minds and left them to make a fresh beginning under an amnesia spell."

"I don't like those." Konner said mildly. "It's very delicate work. All too often it can go wrong and leave the subject with no memory of anything, they become an empty shell with no concept of self beyond their body's needs. I should think that to be worse than murder, in my opinion."

"You are one of the best, it shouldn't have been an issue with you." Heather insisted forcefully. "And it would have been worth the effort to maintain our secrecy. Instead you've trapped them in a world they aren't equipped to deal with; they can never leave now!"

Polly's pulse quickened at the words this witch spoke. To be left an empty shell! To have no memories at all was perhaps the worst thing she could think of.

Molly seemed to agree for she seemed on the verge of snarling something when Konner held up his hands in a placating gesture.

"You're upsetting my servants." He said icily. "Which I'll thank you not to do. They are under a contract that will eventually expire. The clauses are very tight, as you well know."

"Yes." She snapped. "And it's too much a risk Konner. You're letting them return to the human world with full knowledge of us! That's a disaster waiting to happen. They will alert the world to our existence and we will have to pay the consequences."

"They will, eventually." Konner agreed urbanely. "But not right away, I suspect. Where is their proof, after all? They can hardly say they were kept with magic in the bodies of mythical creatures! They would find themselves in a sanitarium before the day was out. No, they will simply say they were held against their will by someone who was determined that they pay for their sins in the park. When they leave here, they will have the means, skills, and discipline necessary to live normal, productive lives and...why am I explaining this again? We have been over this numerous times Heather. I suspect that these two are going to be far more successful than you give them credit for."

"And I think you're giving them too much credit." She snapped. "Their human, even if under a spell now. What do you think the others are going to do? Just let you risk exposing us to the outside world? If you insist on this course of action, they will do whatever it will take to silence these two."

"That will not be wise of them." Konner said in a controlled tone. Behind his iron voice Polly could hear him seething. "I am accounted a fair practitioner, and they will be under my direct protection. Any who seek to harm them will answer directly to me."

"And me." Brian said seriously. "After all, I signed the contract as well. They are to be protected even after their servitude is up. It's ironclad. You're a signatory as well, I believe."

"What!" her voice rose an octave. "How is that possible?"

"You signed it along with the other papers that night of the party." Konner told her. "I told you it was a contract between the mortal women, and you complained loudly then, but you signed the

document attesting that you will not interfere with my plans."

"I remember that." She said.

"Well, in the second clause underneath, it also said that you will come to their aid should anyone seek to harm them outside the clauses specifically stated." Konner said smugly. "So you will have to help them if they come under attack by anyone magical."

"You are walking into a pit of vipers." She sighed, looking again at Polly.

Polly gave her nothing, keeping her face smooth, though she felt certain her nervousness showed through a little.

"Well, they aren't the worst humans I've seen." She said after a long silence. "They might surprise me in the end. We'll have to see. But Konner, you're on shaky ground." She warned, regaining her hard voice.

Anything further she might have said was interrupted by another knock on the door.

Polly started at the sound, opening the door before she realized it.

On the stoop was a grandmotherly witch with silver hair, heavy half-moon glasses perched on her long nose, and a kindly smile on a face that once must have been a beauty, but now showed many smile lines and good cheer. Her dress was bright and obnoxious in reds and yellows, with lots of cats printed on it.

Figures. Polly thought with a secret smile.

"May I take your coat ma'am?" she asked politely.

The woman smiled. "Thank you dearie."

She handed her the hat and coat.

"I must say, you seem to be a nice young girl. Such a pity you lived a life of crime. Well, that at least is behind you dearie." She patted Polly's hand as she hung up her coat in the wardrobe and placed the hat on the shelf. "I have to admit, I didn't think Konner could make it this far with you two so fast. There must have been something underneath for him to work with, hmmm? Now, where is your friend, hmmm? I've heard some things about her?"

"What things?" Molly asked, coming closer and glaring sharply at Konner.

"Oooh! What a lovely, lovely fur!" the old lady cried. To Molly's discomfort she found herself being petted by the old woman, who smiled so happily that neither woman had the heart to remove her. She began giving Molly advice on just the shampoo to use to keep her fur clean and soft when Konner interrupted.

"Missus Rosehall, wouldn't you like to sit down in the dining room? You've had such a long journey."

"Yes, all the way from Blightney." She agreed briskly. "But I ain't as old as all that, dear. However," she said with a bright smile as she seized Molly's arm, much to the taur's discomfort, "This girl of yours can lead me to my seat."

Molly rolled her eyes and slowly led the happily chatting biddy towards the dining room.

"You just had to make one of them into a cat." Heather sighed. "You've become her favorite rulebreaker now."

Konner chuckled. "An accident, I assure you. It hadn't been planned out, and the thought of having her a full centaur crossed my mind, but things just happened to work out that way, on their own

suggestion."

"Hmm, probably sarcastically at that." Brian chortled.

"Well, yes. It had been." Konner laughed.

Heather sighed, and shook her head. "I'm off for the dining room myself." She said. "I really don't feel like spending time with the rest of them any more than I have too."

"I agree." Brian said. "Let me-oof!"

Polly glanced back with a frown, noting Brian's sharp glance at Konner.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to help my friend greet his guests." Brian said with a pained smile.

Polly shivered, wondering who would come next that would make Konner himself nervous.

A knock sounded on the door. Polly found her hand trembling slightly as she reached for the knob to open the door.

On the stoop she saw a thin, balding man. His outfit seemed from the medieval period or perhaps from some strange college graduation ceremony. The long black robes reached down to the floor and down past his hands so he seemed to have nothing in his sleeves at all. Silver moons and stars glittered and danced as they moved about the cloth, giving him a mystical appearance at odds with his narrow, cruel face. His features were so pinched and cold she thought he looked wonderfully like a praying mantis.

"Mr. Vara, I'm pleased you could make it." Konner said cordially.

"Of course." The man snapped in a no-nonsense manner. "You're conduct here warrants a closer inspection. This nonsense about letting humans live among us is disgusting. At least you had the good sense to give them some useful form." He sniffed.

Polly felt insulted, but bit her tongue. Konner had warned her about these people, after all, and she felt she could handle anything they threw at her with dignity and grace. Perhaps Konner would end her sentence a little early, after all.

Vara swept towards the dining room and Polly had a sudden wish she could warn Molly, but a knock on the door dashed those hopes.

This time a fat man dressed in a suit that he obviously thought fit him very well stood there. Polly felt that the only thing holding him in the clothes had to be magic, or those buttons were attached using steel thread. Every button strained to be set free, and though he'd made a herculean effort to tuck his shirttails in, they were pulling out of his too-tight trousers that barely hung on him.

In all, Polly thought she'd never seen a more conceited man.

"Hello Mr. Golveritch." Konner said. "I see you've still to undo that hex. Are you sure I couldn't help you with it? Just for this evening, at least."

"Nyet." The man said haughtily. "I've decided that this form suits me at the dinner table for now. I will leave it when I am good and ready too and not a moment before."

"As you wish." Konner said with a sigh. The fat man's eyes wandered to Polly. She wished she could ignore the hungry gleam, but it immediately brought to mind Greg.

"Ah, so these are the new acquisitions I've heard about." He reached out to touch her breast.

There was a hissing, popping noise and the man drew back his

hand.

"Please, do not touch." Konner said urbanely. "It is part of the contract right now. I do not wish to default early." Brian choked a little, Polly thought, and she realized that this contract did *not* mention guarding her against touching in any way.

"Very well." The man said with a sigh. "But really, why this bother with the contract at all? If you like them, then make them serve you as you will! If you don't like the screams, give them a domination potion and they would love to serve you, their entire being will revolve around it. Why I could whip up a draught..."

"No, thank you." Konner said. "I am content with the current arrangements."

Golveritch sighed while Polly felt weak-kneed with relief. A potion to make her a happy servant slut for the rest of her life?! How disgusting, how horrible! She began to think that falling into Konner's care was a lot better than any of the other alternatives!

The porcine man walked to the dining hall alone; Polly didn't offer to show him the way and Konner didn't comment on it or seem inclined to have her do so.

The others didn't seem to care about her one way or the other, nodding cordially to Konner and Brian and offering polite greetings before making their way to the dining room. Polly didn't care that they ignored her completely, as far as she was concerned that would be quite fine with her.

The last man, however, proved far difference.

The knock came some minutes after the last witch had been swept off into the hall. Its sound caused Polly to shiver: *It sounds like the knell of doom.*

She opened the door to find a tall, rugged man standing on the stoop dressed in a white polo shirt, black slacks, brown loafers, and white gloves. His face might have come from the bust of Adonis, his brown hair, longer than she expected for an ivy league man, reached his shoulders and had been gathered in the back with a black ribbon.

Yet it was his eyes that riveted Polly and made her sweat: they were coal black centers surrounded by arctic white that seemed to freeze the breath in her lungs.

Menace radiated off him as he stepped across the threshold with a slight smirk on his face. His eyes took her in and measured her to the atomic scale. She resisted the urge to cover herself and tried to perform her duties.

"May I take your coat, sir?" she croaked.

"Ja, if I vas vering one." He sneered.

"Dis one is not very usevul, ja?"

"Polly is learning very well, Ernst." Konner said in frozen tones. "Your intimidation tactics are not welcome here, and I suggest you keep a civil tongue inside your head or I will put a hex on you."

Ernst's eyes glittered. "Tell me, haff you vound it?"

"There are many things I've found recently, Ernst. You'll have to be more specific." Konner said.

"Ze Amulet, off course." Ernst said. He sneered. "I see you haven't. Vell, that es no zurprise, eh?"

Konner's knuckles turned white, but his face remained as calm as ever.

"Ernst, you have a way with words as always. Yet bantering in

the hall seems to be poor manners on our parts. Won't you come into the dining room? I'm sure you must be hungry."

"Ja. Ve vill taste yer pet's cooking, eh?" Ernst said nastily. "I may be able to choke some down, ve vill see."

"I guess we will." Konner agreed.

Polly carried the heavy gold platter in through the door, leading Molly who had another, equally large dish. Both women concentrated on setting the food down as quickly and professionally as they could, not to seem rude or hurried.

The atmosphere was certainly tense, more so than the time that Greg and his gang had accidentally stumbled into another's turf. The resulting showdown had been like this, primed and ready to explode. Yet Polly felt more afraid here than before. Then she'd been ready to run away, despite what Greg and the others would think. Here she had no such escape, and the magic that would result from any showdown...she had no idea what could happen to her. Perhaps that was what made it worse, the not knowing. Before she knew she could die, but here she could wind up being a sea slug for all she knew.

She admired the way Molly moved through the room. To everyone's obvious surprise, she moved through the dining room as if she owned it, every motion smooth and rehearsed, every placement perfect. Polly found herself going off the cues Molly gave her and trying to match the calm, slightly bored expression that she kept on her face.

"Ah, that's the ticket!" Miss Rosehall cooed when the cover pulled off her fish and chips. "Thank you dearie!"

Molly gave no acknowledgment, but moved down to heather, pulling off her cover to reveal prime steak and baked potato with a small salad.

Polly made her way swiftly down her side of the table, whisking the tops off each of the dishes until every guest had their meal ready to eat. Then, without fanfare or flourish, she pulled the cover off Konner's and followed Molly back to the kitchen.

"Ugh, if that dotty old woman tries to pet my fur again, I'll claw her." Molly cursed as she slammed the dishes into the sink, making them rattle.

"Hey, be glad she likes you so much." Polly told her. "After all, she is nice in her own way, and might at least help us find out what is in this contract of ours that everyone keeps saying we are under."

"Yeah. I still don't see how they can have us under a contract when we never signed or looked at it." Molly agreed. "But for tonight, we should focus on the chores at hand. I don't like the way that Von Krappman is looking at us, he's going to try something, I'm sure of it."

"Possibly." Polly agreed. "But then, he's under so many eyes that it would be difficult for him to do, I think. He might simply try and grab us or something, and say that we came on to him."

"That's why I've been keeping a smooth face." Molly said, "Hard as it is, they can't say we've done anything to warrant attention if we don't acknowledge them or whatever, right?"

"Er, right." Polly agreed. Though in truth, she had no idea. From her experience it didn't matter what expression you had on your face, if your body looked good then they would try anything, assuming

you'd like it too or even not caring.

Polly followed her back out into the dining room, noting how the fat russian had already packed away his plate, big as it had been, and seemed to be eyeing his neighbor's hungrily.

Fortunately, one of the sideboards had a dish piled with fruits and nuts, part of the after-dessert snacks meant to be served at the very end of the meal, but in this case...

She snatched it up and swept over to him, moving like Molly had. She placed it down next to him without fanfare and stepped back.

He immediately attacked the fruits and nuts, making his neighbors glance disapprovingly at him.

Polly noted a raised glass and hurried to the sideboard where a bottle stood sitting in a chiller. Moving more carefully to keep the bottle from being shook, she pulled it up and walked over to the glass. To her sinking heart it turned out to be Ernst.

"Danke." He said as she began to fill his glass.

As she finished and began to tip the bottle back, his glass shook slightly and he raised his other hand to steady it, brushing against her arm.

A slight tingle, like a static shock passed through her arm, but it was over in an instant and she thought nothing of it. After all, she'd been shocked and given shocks, plenty of times before.

She hurried to another raised glass, missing the half smile on Ernst's face as she moved quickly through her tasks.

Most of the guests didn't even nod or say thank you for her services, and there were so many she kept in constant movement, never seeming to have a moment's rest. Molly, she noted, seemed to becoming equally frazzled by dinner's end.

Most of the talk she overheard seemed to deal primarily with the current market prices of spell equipment, the state of the magical economy, and discussions on what might improve matters.

It sounded no more different than any other night at her dinner table at home when she was a kid, when her dad would come home from the butcher's covered in blood and complaining about the fluctuating market for beef products.

After the main courses were whisked away, they brought dishes of ice cream and bowls of toppings from the kitchen and set them down in front of each guest. There were lazy sighs of contentment as each of them eyed the treat in front of them. Languidly, they placed their favorite toppings (Konner had freshly cut strawberries in strawberry syrup, she noticed) and slowly finished the meal in front of them.

At the last clink of a spoon being placed on the table there came a low sound, a groan of contentment, Polly thought. That seemed her last thought for quite a while as she helped convey the dishes to the kitchen and tip the majority into the dishwasher. Those that couldn't be immediately placed were set aside to wait for more time.

It took six trips, even with the help of trays, to move everything out of the dining room. By that time the guests had followed Konner into the dining room.

"Should we follow them?" Polly asked, biting her lip as she stared at the closed doors.

"Why?" Molly asked sardonically. "After all, it's not like the prick went out of his way to make sure we was with him. Leave him, and let's get back to the kitchen. If he asks we can say we were cleaning

them dishes and waitin' for his signal."

Polly thought of the little bell, and concluded that Molly had a point. She didn't want to intrude, nor did she want to be in there really in the first place.

Smiling, she followed Molly into the kitchen where they set to work on the dishes (just in case someone came in to find them), though they didn't hurry the job. Neither of them were keen to be caught idling on a night like this, by Konner or anyone else.

As they worked they talked about the guests.

"What do you think of Heather?" Polly asked.

"Cold fish." Molly grunted as she tackled a particularly stubborn chunk in one of the pots. "Stubborn as hell too, and pissed about us being here in the first place."

"I thought you might have liked her," Polly teased, "Seein' as how she's all about law enforcement."

"Of illegal laws." Molly grunted. "Let's face it, their so-called laws weren't voted in by the people, put before congress and vetted by experts, so I don't really hold them as laws. Especially when the mostly concern with turning people into fish for finding out about them, even if they're innocent." She scowled a little before her expression cleared.

"That Brian, though." She continued, "I thought he was charming. Seemed the two of you might hit it off. Maybe take you away from all this." She gestured around them with one soapy hand.

"Knock it off." Polly grunted, souring. "I don't want to be in the same room with him, let alone have him touch me...they know I'm keeping secrets, and that's bad enough. I don't want them to find out...about things." She finished, suddenly darting a fearful glance at the door. What if someone stood behind it, listening?

Molly must have guessed what she was talking about because she said nothing more of him.

"Well, at least we can somewhat count on the support of that British witch." She said sourly herself.

"Well, so long as you remain a cat, that is." Polly said with a grim smile. "I think she'd probably be a lot less caring if you hadn't been of the feline persuasion."

"Probably." Molly agreed. "She reminds me of my great-grand aunt. She never had less than fifty strays hanging round her house at any time. One year I went over there and she conned me into helping her make dozens of these little houses for them. They even had plastic windows she made herself! She was the sweetest woman though, would give you the shirt off her back if you were in want. Sometimes even when you weren't in want."

"She sounds nice." Polly said softly.

"What about you, any grand aunts in the family?" Molly asked.

"Not really." She said sadly. "If there were I never met them. Mom and dad could barely afford the rent, let alone a car." She fell quiet, not wanting to dwell on her parents, wondering if they were even searching for her or had assumed she'd come to a bad end.

"Well," Molly continued, picking up on her mood, "At least this night's almost over."

"Thank God." Polly shivered. "I never want to go through something like this again. Molly, those people in there scare the shit out of me."

"Me too." Molly admitted. "They don't like us simply for being human, or see us as pawns in their little power games. Neither option's good, but both of them together is real, real bad."

"I'm...you know, I'm surprised to say this, but I'm sort of glad we're under that contract, whatever it is." Polly admitted softly. "At least we have some protection."

"Yeah." Molly said at long last, chewing her lip thoughtfully and ignoring the blood that flowed out, a sign of her utter focus Polly knew. "As much as I don't like how it was done, they seem to take their laws seriously, so the chances of them trying something is gotta be low, which is good."

Before either of them could say anything else, the bell for the library rang and they looked at one another.

"And back to the lion's den we go." Molly misquoted softly.