

Night Terror

Polly and Molly ended up returning to the kitchen to fetch brandy or punch for those who didn't want anything alcoholic and serving them in the library.

Polly wasn't surprised to see additional comfy chairs had been set near the fire for each of the guests. What did surprise her was that none of the chairs matched the other. She figured, however, that it wasn't an oversight on Konner's part; either the guests had summoned the chairs themselves, or Konner had created each according to their occupant.

Mrs. Rosehall (who wanted the punch) sat in an overstuffed chair, soft brown, with a red knitted cap set artfully on top and a big red pillow (also knitted) beside her against the arm of the chair. She smiled at Polly when she received her glass before returning her attention back to Konner, calm and regal as the Queen of England.

Heather (whisky, so Molly ran back to fetch her some) sat in a western rocking chair of pretty wood stained a dark brown nearly black. She eyed Konner thoughtfully over the brim of her glass.

Ernst sat in a chair of a black wood carved lifelike with the skulls of various animals like the bizarre and depraved trophy of some German hunter. The only thing he missed appeared to be the pith helmet with the spike ontop.

There were other chairs too, but they fell in line with more of what Polly would expect to see at a common furniture or antique store.

"My friends." Konner said, gaining everyone's attentions. "We are here tonight to discuss the regrettable instance with Donald Crabpott. Has justice been carried out?"

"I don't know about justice." Ernst said quickly, looking over his glass with his eyes half-lidded. "After all, he wasn't attacking any wizard or witch in his dementia."

"He was attacking mortals though." Ms. Rosehall reminded. "And that would expose us all to the eyes of the modern world. That was against our laws."

"Laws put into place to preserve lower life forms." Ernst argued. The fat Russian and the bony man nodded in agreement.

"Da." The fat Russian grunted. "Mortals they be, how you say, for play? Why should we care if some were turned into stone? Granted it would be a waste on some of them, but the noisy ones were better off stone!"

A fire kindled in Polly's heart, and only Molly's quick reaction saved her from lunging across the room and striking him. She gave a warning squeeze and let go of Polly's hand where she'd seized it.

Polly's tail swished back and forth behind her and she

thought her ears might be flattened against her skull. She spent some moments forcing herself to adopt a neutral position, but it was hard.

When she looked up, she saw Brian's face relax and he gave her a small smile. Apparently he'd sensed her anger.

Well, good! Let him know how pissed I am! Those were kids, Goddammit, not playthings!

By the time she got her mind back on the conversation, Mrs. Rosehall was just finishing an angry speech on their callousness while the subjects of her ire simply looked at her with half-concealed expressions of distaste.

You tell them, ma'am! Thought Polly as she silently cheered the distinguished British witch on. She thought Molly did the same, judging from the twitching tail but warm looks she shot her.

"Miss Rosehall, gentlemen, please." Konner said politely, but not very urgently. "We are not here to fight, but to decide if yesterday's actions were conducted within the letter of the law."

"For my part, I'd say yes." Brian chimed in, amid the sneers of Ernst and his lackeys. "You were attacked first, as the magic traces clearly show. Can you lot say otherwise?" he challenged.

There was some grumbling, of course, but the others said nothing in denial.

"Then that point is settled." Ms. Rosehall announced gravely, sounding not unlike the magistrate. "Young master Konner has acted in self defense when attacked by another. There is no dissension on this point."

"Point of order." Ernst called before she could finish. "We must wonder if the accused didn't aggravate what might otherwise have been a peaceful contact with inflammatory rhetoric or other methods." He hinted darkly.

Brian stood up with a roar, shaking his fist at Ernst while Heather began shrieked; "How dare you! How dare you!" over and over at him. Mrs. Rosehall looked skeptical, staying silent through the exchange of words.

Only Konner remained unchanged, staring impassively from a face which might have been chiseled from granite.

"You may believe whatever you like, Ernst." He said quietly. His voice, however, cut through the others shouts like a knife, slamming silence down on the room instantly.

"However my encounter went with Donald Crabpott, it has ended in his unfortunate demise. All things considered, that should be a point in my favor. Your efforts to turn Crabpott to your side were less than successful, if memory serves."

Rage lit Ernst's eyes and his hands balled into fists, but he made no move but remained in his chair. The rest took the hint and sat down, listening now as Konner spoke.

"Well, with Ernst's permission, we shall now consider that

matter settled. Is there other business we should talk about?"

"What about..." Brian began.

"I'm sorry, but it isn't finished yet," Konner interrupted. "I should have the final touches on it within a couple of weeks, and will lay the proposal before the council. Shall we return then?"

The others nodded their assent and, to Polly's excitement, they began to stand up. The moment they did so their chairs vanished as if they'd never been.

Molly tugged on Polly's sleeve, and she came to herself with a start; the guests would need their coats!

Hurrying out the door, she could hear the guests making their goodbyes behind her.

In the hall she quickly flung open the wardrobe and pulled coats and hats out for each owner as they came out. Molly then opened the door and let them out, remaining coldly aloof with a disinterested air that Polly wished she could emulate.

At long last only two coats remained in the hall; Brian and Heather's. Mrs. Rosehall had been last to leave, exclaiming in delight again over Molly's splendid coat and her stunning good looks.

Molly actually smiled at her and allowed herself to be petted, perhaps as an imagined reward for standing up for them in the dining room. With a giggle of delight, the old witch stepped out the door and vanished.

Polly waited in the hall a bit to see if the last two guests would appear, but neither showed and the two women eventually went back to the library. Poking her head in the door, she saw that their chairs were back and all three sat near the fire in deep conversation that stopped when Konner looked straight at her.

"Polly," he said warmly. "Thank you for your services. You've done wonders tonight, you and Molly both. Why don't you retire for the evening? I'm sure the last bit of washing up will wait until morning."

"Yes sir, thank you." Polly said.

Bowing out, she closed the door firmly behind her.

"Well, at least we have permission to go to bed." She said with wry face.

Molly smiled. "Funny when he said we should leave the washing up when we finished that hours ago while they were in that library."

"I'm glad we don't have that Ernst character anymore." Polly shivered. "He gave me the willies."

Molly nodded sympathetically. "I thought about switching sides with you in the dining room when I saw he was parked on your side, but by then it was already too late."

"It wasn't too horrible." Polly comforted. "But there was something about him, something evil."

"Yeah. Well, we're done with him." Her jaws cracked open in a yawn, her pink tongue curling just like a cat's.

"Yeeeeeeaaaah. Excuse me, I gotta be tired. Perhaps we should take Konner's advice and get some sleep, eh?"

Polly nodded, feeling wrung out herself. Bidding goodnight to Molly in the hallway, she entered her room and got ready for bed.

Once she lay her head down, however, sleep eluded her. She remained motionless for a while, feeling the minutes tick by as she waited for sleep to claim her, but nothing happened.

Somewhere in the house a clock chimed the hour. It was nine. The front door opened and shut, and she thought that one or both of the guests must have gone home. Another chime came, and it was half-past. Still sleep eluded her.

Just as she resolved to turn on her light and find a book to read, her mouth began to burn like she'd took a bite of hot pepper.

That's weird, she thought to herself. *I didn't have anything spicy.*

She got up to get herself a drink of water. Halfway to the bathroom she suddenly felt *something in her mouth move!*

Panicking, she rushed to the mirror and flipped on the bathroom lights. Opening her mouth to see what was going on, she saw nothing out of the ordinary at first, then she noticed something moving, there behind her teeth.

She looked at it in puzzlement, then it pushed its way out, a pair of red eyes glaring malevolently at her.

She tried to scream but the thing blocked her airway. She tore at it, trying to dislodge whatever it was, but sudden pain bloomed on her tongue. The thing slithered past her teeth and all fight left her.

The monster was her tongue!!!

It was impossible, yet she couldn't deny the evidence of her eyes; her tongue had come to life in her very mouth.

In the mirror, the monster blinked curiously, then the tip seemed to writhe, as if trying to smile without lips or mouth of its own. She trembled as it began to move forward, towards her!

She closed her mouth firmly with a click. She felt incredible pressure on her teeth, then a prying, wriggling sensation as her jaws began to be forced apart.

Unbidden, the memory of science class one boring Monday surfaced, with wrinkled old Mrs. Parmiffen droning in the room about the various muscles in the human body and how they worked. Then she'd asked which was the strongest, to which everyone answered, "Thigh!".

She'd smiled at them in a superior sort of way, adjusted her thick glasses on the end of her beak-like nose, and announced they were all wrong.

"By far the strongest muscle in your body is the tongue. For its size, it is proportionally stronger than the thigh,

arms, or any other muscle that you would care to name. If made to child size, the tongue would be more than strong enough to pick each of you up without effort."

If I ever live through this, I'm going to have to apologize to Mrs. Parmiffen for thinking her an idiot, Polly thought.

By now her tongue, getting ever larger and thicker each second, had emerged from her tightly shut lips.

Konner! Molly! Help!

She turned and ran for the door, intending to throw it open. The creature (she couldn't think of it as her tongue anymore) had other ideas.

Before she could reach the door it reached up and poked her eyes.

Not expecting such a painful assault, she jerked her head back, shutting her eyes.

Her hoof struck a hard, unyielding object and she tumbled, her scream cut to a bare gurgle.

Something soft enveloped her, and she realized she must have fallen into bed. The sheets billowed around her thrashing form, her hooves striking the side boards with the resonance of gongs.

Won't someone please help?! The thought echoed in her brain as she frantically tried to gain her feet. Each time she got close, however, the monster, now about five feet long and heavy, would grab the side of the bed and force her to her knees.

Suddenly it thickened itself, cutting off her air! She scrabbled at her throat, trying to breath. If she could only pull her skin out enough, it might be enough to get a small amount of air around the thing strangling her.

A sensation of something slimy stroking her forehead brought her attention away from her hands to see her tongue licking her, the eyes glowing with delight at her misery.

If I die, you will die as well! She thought, trying to make the thing see. It was a part of her, surely it understood that!

Apparently not, or it didn't care about its death. Her vision began to black, and she knew then that she wouldn't live to see the morning.

Emily! I'm so sorry. She firmly fixed the image of her sister's face in her brain as nothingness swiftly closed in.

Bang! She dimly heard her door fly open, but she could do nothing about it. They were too late...the monster had killed her.

As she sank into oblivion, the voices grew dim around her, then she heard nothing more but a rushing in her ears.

"She's going to be all right, isn't she?" came a frightened voice. Polly tried to place it, then realized it had to be Molly, yet she'd never hear her sound like that before.

"She's fine now." Konner's voice came. "It was close, but she will recover."

"She is already awake." A new voice, one she'd only heard a

little while ago, who was it? Wait, of course! It was Brian, she'd met him only a little while ago.

"Polly, Polly are you there?" Molly asked urgently. Soft hands, softer where the fur surrounded the rough pads, cradled her face.

Her eyes fluttered open to meet Molly's anxious gaze, the normal deep green nearly obscured by the huge pupils in her warm, *familiar* face.

Past her were Konner, Brian, Heather and Mrs. Rosehall. Polly recoiled when she saw her face: the elder woman stood cold and stiff as a statue, white rage radiating off every line of her wrinkled face. No gentle humor existed in the roiling maelstrom of her eyes, promising no mercy to whomever she directed her fury against. Power rippled about her like heat off the furnace, making Polly wonder if she would explode at any moment.

"Is the poor dear all right?" she asked commandingly.

"Yes, ma'am." Molly answered quickly, evidently cowed by this different woman.

"Very good dear. Now just stand back while we figure out who did this."

She pointed towards Polly and she felt a disturbingly familiar tingle erupt in her flesh...very familiar in fact.

"Ernst!" she gasped in a raspy voice. "It was him!"

"I might have known." Konner said angrily.

"We must make sure." Heather said, her own face set angrily while small fireballs danced around her fingertips. "She has accused the most likely suspect, but everyone knows your dislike of him and you might have skewed her reasonings. Remember, Nikoli thought you were being an idiot in not melting their minds into happy empty shells."

"He wouldn't have the guts for something like this." Konner growled. "Ernst, on the other hand, would. But by all means, look hard at the spells done here. We must be absolutely certain."

The two women nodded together, then asked Polly to stand up.

Polly felt an emotional mess; her terror blocked most thoughts other than the image of that enormous purple tongue dancing out her mouth. Yet now the danger passed, she was utterly, completely exhausted, which threatened to drag her back off her shaky hooves as she struggled to them.

The others stayed back as Heather chanted in a strange, lyrical tongue that Polly couldn't for the life of herself remember afterwords.

She braced for something invasive, electrical, or something that she would feel, but nothing happened.

"Gentlemen," Rosehall announced suddenly, taking Polly by surprise. "We are performing a spell to show illegal magic has been wrought upon this unfortunate victim by malicious intent."

We are ready to show the caster now and await your magical presence."

"I am here." Came a voice from the empty space near her shoulder, making Molly start violently.

Soon other voices joined that one voice, until Polly lost track of them all; but she thought there might have been ten voices in total.

"Now, let us see who has cast this spell." Heather said quietly, her disdain clear.

The two witches chanted in unison, pointing towards Polly now.

Now she felt the now familiar tingle erupt across her skin. The memory of Ernst touching her arm filled her mind, and the results thereof. She crouched into a ball, whimpering as she raised her arm to ward off any spells or blows, while her hand cupped her mouth, set to rip her tongue out by the roots if it so much as twitched.

"Easy girl," Molly soothed, grabbing her firmly by the shoulders. "They don't mean any harm. I promise you." She glared malevently at the witches. No, Polly corrected herself as she peaked at her friend's face, at the point where the disembodied voices had come from.

"The spell wrought on her has been identified." The witches said in perfect unison, their tone and tempo exact, as if one mind controlled two mouths at once. Polly hid in Molly's fur, how she hated magic!

"It is obvious that this spell could only come from one user. Is that acknowledged?"

"Of course it is." Came the voice, the hated, hated voice! "It was my little practical joke. No permanent harm was meant of it, nor came from it."

Brian's face acquired a puce cast. Polly couldn't see past Molly's fur at Konner's face. What was he thinking? What would he do? She didn't want to find out.

"This was no mere joke, but a deliberate attack." Konner's precise voice was so cold frozen nitrogen would seem warm in comparison.

"Why would I attack you?" came the lazy reply. "You have nothing that I can see worth having. Those playthings of yours are pretty, but hardly uncommon. There isn't reason for me to fight over one of them." And when he said "them", he spoke as one might a common, disgusting beetle or rat that someone might have as a pet or science experiment.

"Nevertheless, I perceive this as a direct attack on two women under contract to me. Can there be any doubt?"

"Nyet." Came a heavy, surprising voice. "There is no doubt. Ernst has, unfortunately, overstepped his bounds. Let him face his censure and then let us move on."

There came a dry chuckle, Ernst evidently found the notion amusing.

"What is the proposed censure?" asked a new voice. "It is clear to all of us that this is very minor magic, hardly worth the censure with the exception of the contract."

"It is the principle." Konner insisted. "My servants should not wonder if they are going to die. This spell was cunningly laid to strike when she was at her most vulnerable. If there wasn't warning magic pulses, then I wouldn't have known anything was wrong until I found her dead in the morning."

"Agreed." The council said, one at a time. "For that, and the fact that such damage was done, Ernst will face punishment. He is reduced in council favor now, and will suffer a corresponding reduction of his magical stock."

"WHAT!!!" shock and outrage wailed, and Polly shivered at the hatred in that voice; if she hadn't made a serious enemy before, she certainly had now!

"That is satisfactory to me, for this attack is an attack on my person." Konner said. Where Ernst sounded hot, Konner was a frozen glacier, able to steamroll over the volcano and snuff it out.

"Then let the council decision stand." There could be no denying the satisfaction in Heather's voice.

There came a chorus of agreements, and then silence.

"Well, that's that." Mrs. Rosehall said briskly. "I'll see to the young gel now. You gents be back off to the library with Heather here. Molly will remain with me. Go on, off with you."

The three bowed and departed, though Polly warmed when she saw Konner look back worriedly at her.

"Now, let's get you a soothing cup of tea and have you ready to bed." Mrs. Rosehall announced. "Molly, dear, would you mind boiling some water and letting this steep in it?"

From her small handbag she produced a tea bag of an unusual purple hue.

"Yes, ma'am." Molly hurried off to do as she'd asked.

She was back soon with the tea. When Polly drank it she felt the hot liquid spread to her fingers and toes like she'd been dipped in a hot tub.

"There we go." She said encouragingly, patting her hand.

Polly nodded her thanks, finding herself reluctant to speak. To cover, she took another sip of the hot tea with its peculiar taste.

"There dear. You just drink that. It'll help you sleep." She said comfortingly. "And don't worry, unless I'm much mistaken, your friend there is going to spend the whole night with you."

Her words proved prophetic, for Molly walked in carrying her bedding with her that she promptly spread on the floor next to Polly's bed.

"Finish yer cup." Mrs. Rosehall insisted, and Molly drank it obediently, feeling drained and utterly exhausted, though her terror persisted and seemed to grow in spite of it.

Yet as soon as she finished the tea, the tiredness won out and she found herself dropping immediately to sleep. Her last thought, *Oh!, she drugged the tea*, carried her off into oblivion.