

Fallen Innocence

Polly kept touching the corners of her mouth. Her fingers drew little circles around the corners or ran over her red lips shakily.

In the mirror her reflection looked pale and wan. A nervous tic pulsed on one cheek. If she closed her eyes she could still see that monstrous purple creature strangling her as her ears were filled with the sounds of her choking. NO!

She wrenched herself back to the present, breathing heavily. She was thankful Konner had been there so quickly. He'd burst open her door before she could black out and shrank...it back to its normal size.

Molly had followed soon after, hearing the bang of the door flying open, and comforted Polly long into the night. Konner had come in early in the morning and found both of them still up and cast his spell on them to put them both into a dreamless sleep.

Polly shivered as she carefully put on her uniform and straightened it painfully neat. Somehow the motions of going through her morning routine kept the fear at bay.

In the hallway she went straight for the hall closet and grabbed her dusters. Putting to work with a will she began dusting the downstairs hallway, moving on to rooms, cellars, closets, whatever she could find that might have a little bit of dust in it.

She found herself lost in her work, the soothing movements of the duster kept her mind miraculously clear.

A hand touched her flank. Polly screamed in terror and lunged forward, away from the contact.

"Easy! Easy!" Molly shouted from behind her.

Polly was halfway down the hallway before she could stop herself. Molly stood patiently waiting for her to come back.

<Sorry.> Polly signed sheepishly.

"What was that hun?" Molly frowned.

Polly signed again.

"You've been taking ASL as your required second language, I'd forgotten." Molly said, "But you can talk, you know. Nothing's going to happen to you. We're here."

Polly backed away, shaking her head. She wasn't sure she'd ever open her mouth again.

Molly smiled. "Well, I guess you have the right to be leery. But don't you think you're going to starve yourself! I won't have that! Speaking of which, you're late for breakfast, and we are going to the kitchen, now march!"

<Yes ma'am>, Polly signed wearily.

She allowed herself to be frog-marched back to the sparkling kitchen where two plates sat waiting for her. The first was a generous portion of oatmeal, with a side of her favorite dish, apple pie. A glass of dark amber liquid sat next to it.

<What's that?> she asked. <I don't drink alcohol.>

<Its mead.> Molly signed back shakily, she didn't have as good a grasp as Polly did. <It's to help settle your nerves. Not bad idea in opinion.>

Polly grunted; to get stoned drunk would help settle her nerves nicely, she felt. But she suspected that if she took that first drink

she'd never stop; she'd watched her friend Bethany's mom do that when they were in middle school, and seeing it ruin their lives together like that made her scared to take any alcohol.

She signed as much to Molly slowly, so the cat woman could follow along.

"Well, that's...something." She said at last. "Well, I'll leave it there for you, and if you want it that's fine. If you don't, I'll take it later."

And with that she took her place on her side of the table, leaving the food and mead for Polly.

Polly was touched at the gesture and smiled at her friend. When she took her place on the table however she began to get shaky and weak. She trembled, feeling sweat pop out of her forehead as she stared mutely at the spoon waiting for her. Taking a deep breath she reached out and took the spoon by its cool metal handle.

The oatmeal jiggled and swayed with the spoon's wild movements, but somehow it got close to her mouth, which remained stubbornly closed as it drew near.

"Come on girl, that's it." Molly urged. "You can do it. I'm right here, nothing's going to happen."

Slowly, Polly's mouth cracked as she exerted all her thought into putting the shallow metal bowl in her mouth and sucking off the gruel.

She swallowed quickly, feeling pangs of hunger in her belly strike the moment food entered. Her stomach demanded more, but her mind was instantly repulsed by the fact she'd opened her mouth. A giant tongue loomed in front of her and she dropped the spoon with a clatter as she backed away from the table with wide eyes.

A calming sensation overtook her then, pushing back the fear and holding it at bay. Her breathing steadied and now she could hear the sound of chanting behind her.

Spinning, she saw Konner standing nearby in his usual neat dress, his glowing palm towards her.

Bit by bit her fear receded until it was something on the outside of her conscious mind, a distant shout in a crowded room.

"What are you doing to her?" Molly asked, her words coming through hard, yet every one clear and precise, very similar to Konner's she thought.

"I'm holding her fears at bay." Konner managed. "It is not an easy task, so please let me concentrate."

Molly shut up. Konner focused again and the muted voice dimmed further until she couldn't hear it any more. With it silenced, Polly's hunger redoubled with renewed frenzy, and she turned back to the oatmeal, devouring both it and the apple pie in record time.

Molly, taken aback by her sudden appetite, recovered quickly and made sure that Polly didn't choke herself by eating too quickly.

When they'd both finished, Konner released the spell with a sigh. Polly felt the fear return, but Molly's close proximity helped a little and she clutched her friend's hand tightly.

"Molly, Polly, please come into the library in ten minutes." Konner instructed. "I...will speak to you there then." He turned and left the room abruptly.

They looked at each other and shrugged.

"Well, I don't know what's going to happen now." She sighed. "A

death threat all but made against us, warlocks lookin' to make us their pretty toys or corpses, and few allies on our side."

Polly nodded, feeling the world was slowly turning against her.

Someone up there sure hates me, she thought morosely. Nothing she could do about that, but there was something she could do so that no one would ever know...ever find...

<Molly,> she signed. <I need your help.> she was going to take a risk here, but she felt confident that no one had delved into her past too deeply yet. That could change if people started reading the regular papers again, but for now they just assumed she was a loner in the world, and that was fine with her.

"Sure, you know I would do anything for you now." Molly said with a smile and squeeze.

<I need you to NEVER make any mention of my family or my sister, ever again.> she said seriously. <As far as the world is concerned I am an orphan, a runaway, whatever.>

Molly looked trouble. <Polly, are you certain of this?> she asked. <There's a possibility that you could be set free. I think Konner would certainly release you if he knew that you had family and>

<No!> Polly signed emphatically. <I will never put Emily at risk. No matter the cost. If he tries to set me free, I'll refuse.>

Molly gasped. "But why?" she demanded plaintively.

Polly told her to stick to sign language, not wanting to be overheard.

<Look,> she said at last, <We've clearly made some powerful enemies by being who we are. That means the moment we leave this place they'll come after us, or after our families. We can't fight them off, so we can only protect them by making sure no one else knows about our past.>

<They obviously already know it.> Molly pointed out urgently. <After all, they've been reading human newspapers or watching the news or something to be able to tell about the park and the gang.>

<Perhaps then,> Polly said at last after thinking it over for a minute. <But I don't think they will be now. After all, we're the trial run, as it were. Konner chose us, and I think he's the only one to have done anything like this. That suggests he's the only one to get news from the non-magical world, our world. So the chances of anyone knowing who we are at this point beyond our gang affiliations are almost nil. That will work to our advantage as we don't have to worry about them coming after those that we love. They will concentrate on us to get to Konner, and they'll be safe.>

<Polly, I don't think they'll come...> Molly began.

<Of course they will!> Polly snapped back before she could finish, shocked at the obtuseness of the detective. <You know this even better than me! They'll come after us because it will be fun for them...hurt the humans! They're nothing more than filthy animals! We can do whatever we want and get away with it! That's what they'll say Molly, and they'll be right! We can't do anything to stop them, not even if we had the whole city behind us.>

<Those that we love...Emily, your brothers, our parents...they won't ever know what happened to us, but they'll be safe. I can live with that if that means Emily is safe.>

Molly looked ready to argue, but Polly shot her best steely stare and she slumped.

<Very well.> she signed at last.

They went to the library together. They found Konner standing by the long windows, which showed a cold, arctic scene this time. Polly swore she could see a Polar Bear striding across the ice in the distance.

"Pauline. Molly." He turned his troubled face towards them, clasping his hands behind his back. "I wish to speak to you about your contract to me."

Polly paused, feeling her hearts hammering against her ribcage. She couldn't think he would possibly mean...?

"You have moved far enough along, I think that you are capable now of beginning reintegration with the normal population." He said. "However, due to recent events, I would probably suggest we arrange for you to assume new identities for the foreseeable...>

<The fuck we have!> Polly signed furiously.

Konner blinked, surprised at the outburst of hand waving. He looked blank so Polly forced her jaws apart and repeated her sentiment.

"The fuck you have! You get us cursed and create enemies and now expect us to be able to deal with it on our own? That ain't gonna happen, and you know it! You aren't going to abandon us after what you've done! You're big on the responsibility shit, well own up to what you've been fuckin' saying!"

Konner and Molly stood flabbergasted. Konner in particular looked dazedly about as if expecting to see someone hop out of a closet and say "April Fools!", but nothing of the sort happened.

"You've made us targets." Polly continued in a grimmer tone. She wondered how much longer she would be able to speak; already her fire was ebbing as fear choked it down but the light remained. "What hap-ha-happened last night is proof that we are going to be targets now. You've got to keep us safe now, since you're the only one that can do that. Both Molly and I could disappear tomorrow and no one else would even notice; we've got no one to care about us since you turned the old gang into fish (she shot a warning glance at Molly who gave her an inscrutable one), and they were the only ones that might have put some effort into finding us. You've cut us off from the outside world here; don't just throw us to the wolves because you've gotten bored of us."

"Never!" Konner declared fiercely. "I am not..."

"Then prove it." Polly hissed like an angry cobra.

Konner hesitated, looking at her, then to Molly, then back to her. At last he turned to Molly.

"And you?" he asked softly.

Molly shrugged. "I have only one friend in the world," she declared. "And if she's staying, then so am I."

Konner looked around. "All right." He said at last. He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortably around.

"I will see about writing a new contract." He said quietly. "In the meantime, Polly, I'm impressed with your courage. Your terror is plain yet you managed to push it down on your own without my help. Truly, you are something remarkable." He said admiringly.

"Yet that fear remains, and I will need to do something about that." He spoke grimly and his face took on a deathly cast.

"That sort of magic though, is very complex and long. I will

need time to prepare. You are both dismissed. Molly, you are not to leave her side for an instant until I am ready. She is not to be alone, is that understand?"

"Crystal, sir." She said sincerely, taking Polly's hand.

He nodded to them both and disappeared into the rows of bookshelves, heading deep into the library out of their sight.

"Wow, girl." Molly said admiringly when they were out in the hallway. "You've got some fire in you, that's for certain! But now we've got to figure out what our next steps are."

<Isn't it obvious?> Polly asked irritably, her fear now swinging back into full force, but she wouldn't let that hold her back. <We help Konner.>

"Who would have thought of it?" Molly mused quietly as they walked up the stairs to the cleaning closet. "Us, helping him."

<What choice do we have now?> Polly signed as her friend pulled out a pair of dusters. They started towards one of the further walls. <If we help him, he might be able to beat Von Kraupf. If he's taken down, then it might be safe enough to finally get out of here and back home.>

Molly looked thoughtful but said nothing more. Polly was grateful, trying to sign with her hand and hold a duster at the same time was difficult enough!

They spent the afternoon cleaning, as the action soothed Polly. She wasn't sure why, after all, she'd never done as much of it as she had when she came here, but perhaps it was simply the act of doing something that helped? She wasn't sure, but didn't know how to ask anyway.

Molly, for her part, kept a silent and watchful eye on her.

Once they'd finished dusting the house, Polly started on the vacuuming and Molly followed, wearing earplugs to keep the noise from damaging her sensitive ears.

From somewhere in the house a clock chimed, probably the one in the master bedroom that told normal time, sounding out almost seven.

"It'll be time for bed soon!" Molly said in surprise. "And we haven't had dinner yet!"

Polly's stomach growled, yet fear knotted her belly at the same time. She wanted to say no, to ask to clean just a little longer, so she could work up her courage to tackle the kitchen again, but she knew deep down that just waiting wouldn't make it any better.

Reluctantly, she followed Molly into the kitchen and helped her set out ingredients for sandwiches. Molly hummed a tune as she worked, which soothed Polly and she listened eagerly as her muscles slowly relaxed.

Once they finished Molly followed Polly into the library where they found Konner pouring over musty tomes on his desk, writing careful notes with Heather and Mrs. Rosehall studying over his shoulder. There was no sign of Brian.

"Dinner?" Molly slipped into her "professional" voice again.

Konner looked up from his work with a quizzical look.

"Is it dinner already?" he asked in surprise, checking a wall clock that Polly couldn't remember seeing before, but assumed had been magicked in.

"So it is!" he shook his head. "Past time, actually, but we've

all had things on our minds today."

Heather nodded. "So we have." She sounded weary; Polly noted the slump of her shoulders and stray hairs that she irritably brushed out of her eyes. "A meal would be welcome."

"Thank you, dearie." Mrs. Rosehall said with a warm smile for them. "You gels are gems! Simply gems!" she plucked a sandwich from the stack and took a bite. "MM! I don't suppose you have any tea?" she asked hopefully.

Molly shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I didn't put the kettle on when I made them. Would you like me-us, to go put a cup on for you?"

"If it won't be too much bother." She said. "And I just happen to have one in my bag here somewhere. No, that's the Liverwort I got... no, that's the Hydrangea from Sally, she's a sweet girl, and here's my sister's cake...where is it?" she asked no one in particular.

She'd grabbed her bag while she'd been speaking and reached into it. Though the purse was nearly the size of a gym bag, Polly didn't think it would be as deep as it seemed. Even as they watch she suddenly stuck her entire arm in and seemed to be groping around looking for something.

Polly suspected then that the bag had some magic on it like Mary Poppins. She shrank from it a little, hating magic.

Mrs. Rosehall seemed to take no notice, but searched for-

"Got it!" she announced, pulling a box of tea out of her bag and holding it up in triumph. "One of me favorites. Could you put it on for me?"

"I'd be delighted to, madam." Molly said.

Turning from the trio, she led Polly back to the kitchen. There she put on the kettle, laid out a cup and saucer, boiled water and placed the bag in the teacup. When the water was hot she poured it in and let it set for a while, seemingly absorbed in her work. But Polly could see her sneaking glances at her regularly.

After a few minutes she gingerly picked up the cup and saucer and placed it on a tray. Polly picked it up before her and held it easily in her hand, walking smoothly out the door with Molly following. Polly tried to school her face to appear composed, but her fear crept through and spoiled the effect she suspected.

In the library she neatly served Mrs. Rosehall and received a pleased smile in return.

"I will be ready to begin shortly, Pauline." Konner said, sounding tired and worn.

"No, you are not." Heather said with utter surety. "You are tired, and could make a mistake that you will blame yourself for later. You are going to have to wait to go about removing the memory later, after you sleep."

"Polly would not be able to sleep tonight." Konner retorted. "Not with her fears crowding in. If I rest well, then she will not."

"And if you foul up then she will suffer far more than a mere missed night's sleep, no matter how frightening." Heather told him. "Mrs. Rosehall and I shall stand watch over her as she sleeps, and her friend as well, I suspect. You will get your own sleep and in the morning, if I judge you to be sound, you will proceed."

Konner looked to be on the verge of arguing, but he slumped and nodded.

"Very well." He said at last. "Have it your way. I'll see you in

the morning. Don't worry about washing up tonight, just go and get some sleep. I will see you in the morning, and hopefully this will get cleared up then."

Molly led the way to Polly's room. She had never taken her stuff out of there, so she didn't have to go back to her room for anything. Polly was grateful; even the act of brushing her teeth, a nightly chore, was extremely difficult and only possible with her presence. She felt nothing but gratitude for her friend, to whom she felt closer to now than any other save her sister.

When they returned to the bedroom, they found Mrs. Rosehall seated in a comfortable poufy chair knitting quietly without any magic, humming quietly to herself. A third bed had appeared while they were in the bathroom: a solid oak-framed bed with a thick mattress, large pillows, and striped blanket tossed over it for warmth. Heather appeared to be already asleep as she lay there, a blind over her eyes. Polly goggled.

"Don't mind her, dearie." Rosehall said, seeing where she was looking. "Heather is going to take the second watch early this morning, so she's resting now. I'll take the first watch. Are you going to be all right? Would you like some of my special tea for your nerves?"

Polly wondered if she should say yes; that tea had worked wonders the night before, she'd felt more refreshed than ever. But it was still magic, and magic had made her tongue come alive and try to strangle her.

<No thank you.> she signed. <I'll sleep, I'm sure.>

Rosehall leaned back, though her eyes seemed to follow her as she slipped into the covers. Now that she was in bed it did not seem so easy to sleep as she'd hoped, visions of her tongue coming back to kill her got between her and oblivion, jolting her back awake, no matter how tired she felt.

Suddenly, warm furry hands took both of hers. Molly had apparently climbed off her bed, or rolled, onto Polly's and now snuggled against her, her legs tucked under her like a cat's. A huge rumble filled the room, the purr of an enormous, happy cat. It seemed strangely soothing, and Polly began to get sleepy. She remembered the time they'd adopted a stray, when she was a little girl, and the old animal had cuddled onto her bed, purring away as she fell asleep.

Buoyed by the memory, she felt sleep come to claim her at last.