

The Ceremony



Chapter One

The dark-haired girl cut a lonely figure as she surveyed the scene from the upper-floor window of the Governor's Manor. The festive atmosphere had spurred her curiosity, and now she looked out over the town square. The manor's hilltop location afforded an unobstructed view of the spectacle outside.

Numerous vendors lined the streets pushing various wares and trinkets to commemorate the occasion. Others hawked meats or vegetables to the large crowds of people gathered, haggling over prices. The ale was already flowing, invoking singing and laughter -- as well as the occasional scuffle requiring the intervention of the town guard. The unmistakable Captain Lockwood directed his men about while briefly twirling his famous moustache, a familiar sign of frustration as he did his level best to maintain a semblance of order from atop his horse.

It's hard to think of the last time Braewood was this upbeat and busy, Millie pondered, standing on her tiptoes to get a better look, blissfully unaware that doing so resulted in revealing a slight view of her underwear.

From her elevated position she saw the odd bard entertaining small clusters of people, singing songs or playing instruments and doing their best to earn a few coins. She noticed a petite looking redhead had chosen to use a barrel as a makeshift stage. She pranced about with grace and purpose as she performed, playing her fiddle and singing a fine tune that captivated the group of children that had assembled around her.

Millie looked at the redhead more closely as she realized the figure had pointed ears. Thinking back, she recognised the small stature and ears from drawings she had seen in one of her books. "Is that a gnome?" she said out loud. "Wow, I thought they were myth!"

Other activities soon caught her attention, her astonishment at seeing a gnome fading as she took in the revelry about the town. In the centre of the square was a large stage, its wooden frame decorated with flowers and neatly tied ribbons all set for the Ceremony due to take place this evening.

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The door to the Governor's office opened, startling Millie as she turned to see the Governor herself enter. Her name was Lady Lenora Ashvale. On her head was a headband of gold wrought to be shaped like small leaves. She wore a light blue jacket together with a smart dress which was also embroidered with an intricate pattern of vine leaves to match the headband. Her reddish-brown hair was tied in a braid which sat on her shoulder.

*How does she always seem to remain so elegant?* Millie thought as she unwittingly gawped at the Governor, who returned a knowing smile.

Behind her a girl followed, her blonde hair tied in pigtails, the ends of which were dyed pink. She wore a black uniform with a front apron, marking her as the Governor's attendant. In her hands she was carrying a large tray which she sat down on the table in front of a rather plush looking sofa. On the tray was a pot of tea, with some cups and a jug of milk. The thing that caught Millie's eye though was the assortment of small cakes piled neatly on a plate.

"Thank you, Ruby," said Lenora, turning to her attendant. "Would you please go prepare a bath for our guest?"

Millie looked at the attendant, who simply returned the look with what seemed like a hint of disdain. "Yes ma'am," replied Ruby, doing a small curtsy and then leaving for a side room that presumably served as a bathroom.

*Does she have a problem with me?* Millie thought as she watched the attendant leave. Meanwhile Lady Ashvale took a seat on the sofa and began pouring them each a hot beverage. She looked up from what she was doing, noticing her guest still stood as if waiting for instruction.

"Oh, Millicent would you like to come sit down and have some tea?" Lenora asked, signalling with her spare hand to indicate that Millie should sit beside her.

"Yes...My Lady," Millie stuttered as she timidly took her place on the sofa.

"I bet you are excited for your big day," said the Governor as she finished making the tea, gesturing for her guest to take her drink.

"Oh yes!" Millie said with an awkward laugh. "It's still so hard to believe..."

Lady Ashvale just smiled, picking up her cup and saucer and sipping her tea. Millie, unused to dining in such fine surroundings followed suit, doing her best to imitate the example set by the Governor, even down to the raised little finger.

"Please do help yourself to the cakes," Lenora said, a look on her face that suggested she found it highly amusing to see the young girl awkwardly attempting not to look so out of place.

Millie hesitated for a few seconds, greedily eying a sticky bun. The Governor continued sipping on her tea, rather bemused as Millie put down her drink and unceremoniously set about devouring a cake, forgoing any hope of sophistication.

"Millicent, I know today is a big occasion but before we go out there, I think it is important we discuss a few things," said Lenora, her tone becoming more business-like.

"Mhmm?" Millie responded, her mouth full of food. Realising her rudeness, she promptly swallowed. "Uhh of course, my Lady," she said, casually wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and eliciting a raised eyebrow from the Governor.

Taking a deep breath, Lenora continued, "Whether you believe it or not, Thorvald has decided you are the one he has chosen to become his Assistant. And from there you will hopefully earn the right to be someday be called his Apprentice." She paused and placed her hand on Millie's thigh.

"I know this puts a lot of responsibility on your shoulders, but it is imperative that you make the most of this opportunity. Braewood has been waiting a very long time for such an honour and we cannot have it go to waste."

Millie gulped, not quite sure how to respond. A few weeks ago, she had just been a simple farmhand. And today, she was expected to become the Assistant of the powerful -- and revered -- Wizard Thorvald. Now, instead of labouring in the fields or bringing things to market she would be learning all about magic and spending the majority of her time at his castle.

"It's umm... a lot to take in..." Millie replied, in honesty.

The Governor removed her hand from Millie's thigh. "I know," she said with a gentle sigh. "The fact of the matter is Thorvald is so important, not just in keeping our lands safe, but in that he also guarantees our future. He will teach you, but it will not be easy, as I am sure you know."

Millie took a moment to contemplate the Governor's words. "I will do my best," she said, biting her bottom lip in nervous anticipation.

Lady Ashvale beamed with a heart-warming smile. "I am sure you will, thank you," she said before grabbing Millie's hand and giving it a small squeeze as a show of affection. She relinquished it as they heard a loud crash outside.

"What was that?" she asked, leaving Millie and heading to the window to investigate. After scanning the crowd outside, she laughed, "It seems like our dear Captain is having a little trouble."

Taking her jovial laugh as an invitation, Millie stood up and joined the Governor at the window. When she arrived Lady Ashvale put a gentle arm around her shoulder. Outside, she could see Captain Lockwood and his men scrambling to deal with a group of young miscreants, the gnome she had spotted earlier amongst them. Whatever they were up to, it had certainly caused quite the commotion.

Lady Ashvale turned to look at Millie. "It seems your Ceremony has attracted quite the crowd," she said. "Hopefully, they will calm down before this evening."

Millie felt again the sudden realisation that all those people were out there to see her. Stepping back so was no longer within the Governor's grasp, she ran her hand through her hair desperate to calm her nerves.

"What is wrong?" asked Lenora, concerned.

"There's so many people," her face displaying a rising panic.

"Millicent, you are the first to be chosen in decades. It is natural a lot of people would come to see this,"

"But I'm not sure I can go out there," her voice was now shaky and her eyes welling up with tears. *All those people focused on me. What if I screw this up?* Her mind was now racing.

The Governor moved closer and embraced Millie in her arms. "Oh, Millicent," she said with a soothing voice to try and calm the girl down. "You will be fine."

"But I'm not even sure what I've done to deserve this" said Millie, beginning to lightly sob against the Governor's jacket.

Lenora silently waited, allowing the girl to regain some composure. After several seconds, she slowly let go, using her hand she lifted up Millie's face so their eyes met, brushing her cheek. "Millicent, you would not be here if Thorvald or myself did not believe in you. And the people would not be out there if they did not believe in you too." Lenora pulled her close, tenderly stroking the younger girl's hair. "I understand it is a lot to ask, but you have already given this town so much optimism and hope just by being chosen."

Millie felt some comfort, the Governor's embrace steadying her nerves and the words helping to calm her down. She had never enjoyed being the focus of attention, and this sudden expectation had just felt so overwhelming. It brought back memories of when she was a child, gazing up at the sky in awe at the magical fireworks and seeing the beauty in

the magic that was wielded. Everything had seemed so simple back then, she thought with a sigh.

After a few more moments Lady Ashvale stopped stroking Millie's hair, and the girl gently took a step back with a grateful smile. The Governor left her hands on Millie's shoulders and brushed back a loose strand of hair.

"How do you think I felt when I was elected as Governor?" she asked, playfully cocking an eyebrow.

"I... I don't really know," she replied.

"Well, I will tell you," Lenora said, a reminiscent smile on her face.

"When I was elected," the Governor continued, "I, too had worries that I would not be able to go out there and lead this town. It was even worse considering the man I was taking over from was my own father." She paused reflecting on the memories. "But look at me now." she finished, winking at her.

Millie wiped her eyes, letting out a short giggle. "Thank you," she said, giving the Governor a small hug for her efforts.

"You are welcome," Lenora replied politely, feeling the girl give her a tight squeeze that thankfully only lasted for a few seconds before she let go.

The Governor leaned down to look her guest in the eye, her face now serious. "Millicent, please promise me you will be the best Wizard's assistant you can be. Do it for Braewood. Do it for you."

"Yes, Lady Ashvale," Millie replied, feeling a wave of confidence shoot through her. "I promise."

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Neither of the women were aware their discussion was being played out in front of an onlooker. The attendant who had quietly slipped back into the room, stood there visibly irked by what she saw. Raising an eyebrow, she glared at the clueless young girl making a nuisance of herself around the Governor.

"Pardon me Lady Ashvale, but the bath is now ready for your guest," she spoke.

"Oh wonderful," said the Governor. She turned to her guest. "Millicent, would you please go with Ruby, and she will assist you in getting ready."

Millie thought she caught a glimmer of a smirk on the attendant's face, but she wasn't quite certain. "Umm, I can happily bathe myself," Millie replied feeling slightly unsettled.

"No," the Governor chuckled. "I want you to look your absolute best for today. Is that clear?"

Millie, biting her lower lip, simply nodded in response.

"Do not worry, Ruby will take very good care of you. And I have a little surprise for you when you return, as well,"

"Please follow me," interjected the attendant.

Millie looked between them both and finally gave in to the inevitable. She lowered her head and muttered, "Fine."

"Pardon me?" asked the Governor, who did not sound particularly pleased with her response.

"Yes, Lady Ashvale," Millie replied, this time with more conviction. She was desperate not to annoy someone who had seemingly put so much faith in her.

"That is better," said the Governor, "Now, we only have a few more hours until the Ceremony. Please go with my attendant and get ready." The Governor turned away, signifying this wasn't up for debate.

Millie slowly made her way to the door of the bathroom. As she passed the attendant, she saw the snooty look Ruby was giving her, which only made her more hesitant to go in. She glanced back over her shoulder hoping the Governor might still change her mind, but Lady Ashvale paid her no attention. Taking a deep breath, she exited through the door, the attendant following closely behind.

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Lady Ashvale sighed as she heard the door close behind them, finally leaving her alone. She glided her way over to the long dress mirror that she kept in her office, tidying up the loose strands of hair and striking a pose so she could admire her reflection. *Such beauty*, she thought, then she noticed a small patch on her jacket where the young girl had cried.

"Ugh, I hope this doesn't stain," she said, grabbing a small cloth and trying to wipe it away. Her attempts only succeeded in making it worse. Removing the jacket, she threw it on her desk. "That stupid girl has ruined it," she scowled.

She made her way to a large cupboard behind her desk, pulling open the large doors she found several outfits all identical to the one she was wearing. Taking one of the jackets off the hanger she carefully slid it on, feeling exhilaration once more.

She began rummaging among the clothing again, searching for the present she had in store for Millicent, a wicked grin on her face as she picked it out. On the hook was an outfit provided by Thorvald himself.

Thanks to her father, Lenora already knew of his reputation around women. If she had not known, the outfit she held would have told her everything she needed. The shirt was cut very low, her earlier inspections confirming the wizard had conveniently forgotten to include a brassiere. *Like he would forget, that perverted old sod*, she mused. The skirt was also cut very low, to the point where it would barely reach down to the tops of her stockings. *The girl would do well not to constantly flash her underwear*, she thought, imagining the discomfort on Millicent's face and laughing.

"Maybe now she might realise just how often she does it," she said aloud.

She walked back to the mirror, catching another glimpse of herself. Hanging the outfit beside it she went back, taking more time to admire her splendour. "That is much better," she said, blowing a kiss at her reflection.

The outfit itself had put Lenora in a tricky situation; fortunately, the girl seemed completely ignorant of the bigger picture or the strings that were being pulled to make all this happen. Her little outburst today had been a cause for concern, but again Millicent had proven to be quite easy to steer in the right direction when required. The Governor had used her charm to convince the Wizard it was in his best interests to hire an assistant, appealing to his over-inflated ego and base desires. There was no way she was going to let that be ruined by the girl getting cold feet.

*Sacrifices have to be made*, she told herself, fighting the urge to vomit as she imagined what seedy plans Thorvald might have in that head of his. The town would applaud his decision, increasing his renown and keeping them happy. In return he would have a beautiful young woman to train, keeping him suitably busy and out of the way.

Millicent had shown to be the outstanding candidate for the position. The girl was both beautiful and yet incredibly naïve. Offering her to that wolf had gone down extremely well. She would also pay the price for what her family had done to the Ashvale's -- not that the girl even seemed to know about that part.

As much as she detested making that old Wizard happy, she had not lied when she had told Millicent just how important he was to the town. Her plan would bring prosperity to Braewood. It was just coincidence that she would be the one to reap the benefits as well. Lenora put her hands together and flexed them out in front of her, feeling gratified. Her ambitions lay higher than being the Governor to some simple little town in Varala, and she was willing to step on anyone to see that happen.

She looked at the desk to see the jacket she had so casually thrown aside earlier. *Best hide that*, she thought. Grabbing it she walked back to the cupboard and swapped it out with a pair of boots that had been left there.

Shutting the cupboard doors, she went back to Millie's new gift, placing the boots underneath. *Oh yes, this outfit will be perfect after all*, she thought, a grin on her face as she looked at the fully assembled attire. The scant clothing would leave the young girl feeling anxious and exposed, a thought that amused the Governor immensely.

Casually, she sat on the edge of her desk, listening to the sounds outside and wondering how Ruby was getting on with her guest. She knew her attendant would most likely indulge herself with Millie, but so long as she didn't go too far that was fine. Her thoughts began to wander, knowing it would not be too long before she would get a turn, too.



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