

Millie trudged into the kitchen, still in her jammies and yesterday's brown braids, sulking and half asleep. On her way to the dinner table, she dutifully dipped her fingers in the bowl and sprinkled the gratitude blessing over the altar for the faeries.

“Good morning, hon. Go sit. I made giggles for breakfast.”

Millie rolled her eyes. “I'm not a little kid, you know,” she said, slumping into a chair.

A plate of cupcakes frosted with the leaves from their laughter bush sat on the table. The dark green leaves trembled a little in anticipation. Millie started to take one, and it hopped away, just out of reach. She sat still for a long moment; then with predatory speed and precision, she nabbed the little green giggle. Her grip activated its properties, and peals of laughter cascaded out of the cupcake. Millie was in no mood for this. She ate the thing without cracking a smile.

She watched her Mama Linn work a pile of dough, folding soft edges into the center over and over, sprinkling in the Whisperflour, folding some more. It was the secrets cake for some special event at the StoryEarth Preservation Precinct.

Millie's grumpy mother, Mama Bette, was taller and stocky with fair skin, sharp, blue eyes, and hair as short as you could have it and still have hair. She sat at her desk nearby, fretting over the schedule.

“Can we do five hundred hooray!cakes for next Thursday? Precinct wants to honor Myrtle Somebody, the outgoing Old Woman in a Shoe.”

Linn went over to her calendar. “No. We've got the Bluebeard party and a Precinct event. Milliebug, I can warm you up some cackle tea if you want. Would you like that?”

Millie had her head down on her outstretched arm, teasing the last giggle. “Do they have cackle tea in the Precinct?”

“Yes, hon. They have all the same stuff to eat. But it tastes better here, don't you think?”

“I wouldn't know,” she said, aiming her comment like an arrow. “I haven't been to the Precinct since Grandma Set's funeral, when I was four.”

Wrem clumped toward the kitchen in his forest boots. “Hallo, Mamas. Hi, bug.” He put his coat on.

“G'morning, love.” Linn wafted a plate of fresh, hot rolls under Wrem's nose and onto the table. “Buttered poems. And there's tea here. Help yourself.”

“Sorry, Mama, no time. I'll take the poems with me though. Thanks. I've got Tree Care kids coming for class this morning. I'm late.”

And with a nod to Mama Bette and his bag of poems, he tried to pull one of Millie's braids, but she batted him away. He went out the door. Millie sulked into the silence that followed his departure. "Mama?"

"Hm?"

"Why can't I ever go with you on a delivery?"

"We've been over this, hon. You're too old to go through as a baby—I carried you in my energy field then, but I can't anymore—and you're too young to go through by yourself. You need training. You're not ready."

"But—"

"Finish your breakfast and go see Drauml. I'm sure you two can keep yourselves busy today."

"Why can't you just train me now? You trained Wrem, and he gets to go with you all the time."

Mama Linn wiped the counter as she answered, reining in her exasperation. "Wrem was two years older than you when I trained him."

"It's because he was a Ceremonial baby, isn't it?"

"Oh, Millie. All Things Told, not this again."

"It is. He always gets treated special."

Mama Linn ignored her, opened the cupboard, and hoisted out a couple of bags of definitions and explanations to peel and chop up for the order she was working on.

"I'm just the stupid Sting baby Mama Bette found in the forest. I'm never gonna get to do deliveries."

"Not with that attitude." She organized her ingredients.

Bette showed up at the kitchen table and scooped up the last giggle. "What's going on here?"

Millie buttoned herself into a scowl.

“Nothing, Mama Bette,” Linn said. “Millie’s just informing us that we love Wrem more than we love her because he’s Ceremonial, and she’s Sting, and because of that, she’ll never ever, in her life, get to deliver with us to the Precinct.”

“You’re not ready, girl,” Bette said, her mouth full of giggle.

“I told her.” Linn nodded.

“What do I have to be ready *for*?” Millie said, slamming her hands down on the table.

Mama Bette took over. “Millie, the border is no joke. You need years of training to manage the energies. And anyway, what’s on the other side of it that you want so bad? Ddrym not good enough for you?”

Millie got up and poured herself some more cackle.

“There’s nothin’ to see,” Mama Bette barreled on. “It’s just like here, only ugly. They’ve got trees and homes just like us but not as nice. Everything’s all straight lines and hard angles. Only a fool would actually *want* to go there.” She pointed that last part at Millie.

Linn shot Bette a look.

“*Plus*, you gotta make your way around confusing, big, sad, gray buildings to get there, and then there are them noisy, damned fast—”

“Cars!” Bette and Millie said it at the same time, one spitting, one swooning.

Linn stifled a laugh at the comic timing of it and pleaded with her eyes at Bette.

*Don’t go off on the cars again.* Bette was in the river of it now, and there was no stopping her. “I don’t know what’s so fancy about cars.”

Millie concentrated on her breakfast.

“They’re just for people too ignorant to go the way of nature. I’m talkin’ about your own feet or Paulie’s feet. Ain’t nowhere we ever want to go that old Paulie can’t get us there in fine time. Best horse in the world.”

Millie mouthed those last words at the same time as Mama Bette out of her line of sight. She picked up her plate and took it over to the sink, muttering through her teeth, “Cars can save you time.” She scrubbed the plate harder than it was dirty.

“Time. Ha! You sprouts don’t know anything.”

“I’m not a sprout! I’m almost grown. I’m thirteen, Mama Bette.”

“Well, since you’re almost grown, then you already know that time is not for saving. You don’t have little pieces of time that you save up in a box for later.”

“Want some tea, Bette?” Linn moved around in the kitchen, trying to draw her wife’s attention away from this conversation. But Bette’s focus burned on Millie.

“It’s not for rushing around so you can have more of it. You don’t ever have any more of it than you have in your hand right now.”

Millie scrubbed the gossips pan in the sink. “Never mind, Mama Bette. I just think it would be fun to go fast. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Ha! You want fast?” she said and slurped her tea. “Try being my age. You’ll see how fast you went already. Linn, don’t leave those Precinct trash publications lyin’ around. It’s makin’ her wanna be one of them.”

“Careful there, sport. Remember *I’m* one of them.”

“Ah, but that’s an entirely different patch o’ grass, my love. You *left* them to come live here with me.”

“I know, but—”

“The problem with this one here,” Bette said with a thumb toward Millie, “is that she’s never happy, always wantin’ to go somewhere far from where she is and wantin’ to get there faster in her shiny cars.”

“It’s not just about the cars. The Precinct is where all the Players live. I’d give anything to see a High Home or maybe even a Player! I think it would be amazing to be a Player.” The room got very still around Millie’s busy hands in the sink.

Like sheet lightning, Mama Bette’s voice came from far away but lit up the whole room with cold. “Don’t ever say that again.”

“What?”

“I said don’t ever say that again.”

“Why?”

Mama Bette stood up so fast, her chair almost fell over. “You want to be a Player? You want to live all high up above everyone, all la-di-da—”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“Bette.” Linn tried to make eye contact, but her wife was already on the move.

“Looking down your High Home nose on the rest of us poor sops here below? That’s what you want?”

“Bette, stop!” Linn stepped toward them.

“Is it?” Bette was at the sink now and yanked Millie around by the shoulders so they were face-to-face.

Millie lashed out at her Mama Bette, “That’s not what they’re like. Players are in High Homes because they do important work!”

Bette’s hand flew across Millie’s face, and it shocked them both.

“Bette!” Linn rushed over to embrace Millie, but Millie wrenched away and ran to her room, yelling, “I hate you both!” She slammed the door behind her.

Silence roared in the kitchen. Bette looked down at her hand. She opened her mouth to say something, but when she looked up, Linn had turned and left the room.