

Some people take a year to plan a wedding. There are logistical issues, details to be worked out, scheduling conflicts to be resolved.

This one was conceived, planned, and carried out in the space of a month.

There were a number of reasons that it could be done so quickly. The first was the nature of the participants. She could have been a patron saint of impulsive whimsy; he never quite got the hang of caring what the world thought of him. Between the two, it was perhaps unsurprising that prolonged planning and preparation were not in the cards.

The second reason was that they stood at the head of a sizable organization, commanding considerable numbers and resources. They did not have to carry out the logistical work, the numerous small tasks required to arrange such an event, on their own, packed in with their work. They didn't have to scrounge for the cheapest available venue or catering. When a task needed to be done, they could set a dozen minions to it; when funding was needed, it could be procured. This simplified matters considerably.

The third reason was the timing of the wedding. Coming on the heels of a prolonged and intense period of stress, it was perfectly timed to provide a contrast. Much of the world was feeling the need for stress relief in some form or another. As such, those who were invited did not complain about the short notice. The inconvenience was outweighed by the chance to feel as though there was a spot of light in the darkness.

Whatever the reason, what can be said with certainty is this. Barely a month after the notion of marriage was first seriously considered by either of the participants, on a cold January afternoon, it was time to hold a wedding. The following is an abbreviated account of what happened directly leading up to and on that day.

Aiko Miyake

The problems started with location. The obvious answer was to do it in Colorado, since it was nearby and easy. But Edward was basically Winter's dad, and apparently the deal he'd made to stay out of the state didn't even allow exceptions for that sort of thing. Not even I was going to suggest that we do it there anyway, so that meant we had to start looking for other locations.

And naturally as soon as that happened my parents wanted it to be in Japan. I provided a succinct reply of "Fuck that," followed by a less succinct and marginally more polite reminder that it was only after considerable persuasion on Winter's part I had agreed to invite them at all. And I was quite open to being persuaded *otherwise*.

They seemed to get the message.

Even once I had that settled, though, there was still a lot of contention. Winter flat refused to have the ceremony on the Otherside, which was nice in that it saved me the trouble of doing it. But that still left an entire planet, and it seemed like anywhere we picked made *someone* get upset and complain about favoritism.

Finally, after most of a day of this, I said, "South Dakota."

There was a quiet pause, after which Winter cautiously said, "There's nothing there."

"So build something," I said. "You own a construction company somewhere out there, right? Have them throw some kind of stadium together. It's inconvenient for everyone, so nobody can really complain about us being too nice to someone else."

There was a moment where everyone considered, then Winter turned to Tindr. "Can we make it happen?" he asked.

The accountant shrugged. "It's possible," he said. "We'd need more than just the company we have there to get any real stadium done, especially in the time frame you're working on. But we've got plenty of cash and some local talent to get the ball rolling."

"Let's do it, then."

I grinned, and sat back in my chair to wait for the next issue.

"There is no way I'm wearing a dress."

The tailor gave me a long-suffering look. "It's rather traditional," he said.

"I don't care about tradition," I said. "I don't *do* dresses. It isn't a thing that's going to happen."

"Be that as it may," he said. "You asked me for something appropriate to a wedding. If you want to completely ignore tradition, there's a limited amount that I can do for that."

I groaned. "Okay, fine," I said. "What other traditional clothing is there to choose from?"

"Tuxedo?" he said hopefully.

I shook my head. "I don't really do suits either. Too formal."

"Well, formal is sort of the point of the event," he said dryly.

"Still. Next?"

"Dress uniform, maybe."

I chewed on that for a few moments, then grinned. "Okay," I said. "I think I can work with that."

"It does make this rather a waste of time for me, though," he pointed out. "Since you wouldn't be buying anything from me if you go that route."

"Oh, don't feel bad," I said, standing. "I was never going to buy anything from you. I've got other sources for that. The last two hours were really more me just...feeling things out, I guess."

He watched me saunter out of the store with a vaguely disgusted expression.

"So my aunt wants a Catholic ceremony," Winter said.

I stared. "You told her no, I hope."

"Oh yeah. I'd be liable to stab someone if I stood through that."

"Hmm," I said. "Maybe I was hasty in my initial reaction."

He snorted. "Too late. I already made my opinion pretty clear to her. Does raise the question, though. As far as gods go, about all I can offer is asking Loki for his blessing."

I shuddered. "Oh, hell no. I'm sure there's something stupider than that you could do, but I don't know what it is."

"My point exactly."

"Huh," I said. "Church of Satan, maybe?"

"I thought the point was to get something *less* stupid," he said dryly. "Were the problems we've *already* had with Hell not enough for you?"

"LaVeyan Satanism is an atheistic religion," I said defensively. "They've got less to do with Hell than the Christians do."

"I'm aware. But I'd lay decent odds that if we had a Satanist priest doing our marriage ceremony, Iblis would show up at some just for kicks."

"I'm not taking that bet." I thought for a minute, then asked, "Pastafarian?"

"Still not a good idea," he said. "Honestly, we're probably better off sticking to strictly, explicitly nontheistic stuff."

I sniffed. "Man. This is a lot more work than I was expecting. Why did I agree to this again?"

"Aiko. It was *your idea*."

"Man. I have some stupid ideas when I'm drunk."

He snorted. "I can't argue that one. But you weren't drunk. You were, at most, sleepy."

"Same difference."

Winter chuckled. "Fair enough." He was quiet for a moment, then asked, "Do you still want to go through with it?"

"Hell yes," I said, without hesitating. "It's worth it."

Alexis Hamilton

It was surprisingly hard to get the day off. I was solidly in the high-intensity portion of Guard training, when they didn't even want us leaving to get medical treatment. I tried to impress upon the instructors just how monumental of an event this was, but I got stonewalled at every turn.

I was actually wondering whether I'd have to go AWOL and deal with the consequences when I happened to mention the situation to one of the supervisors. We didn't see him often; he didn't have a hands-on role in our training. The supervisors only dropped in now and then to remind the instructors that there were people higher in the food chain than they were. We were all glad for those visits; the instructors always eased up on the psychotic drill sergeant throttle for a while after one.

I knew it was a ploy designed to make us like and trust the system. But damn if it wasn't sort of working all the same. I still didn't trust the Guards as a whole an inch, but I was actually getting somewhat fond of the supervisors. All things considered, that was a fairly significant achievement on their part. That wasn't why I asked him, though, not really. It was more calculated than that. If they wanted to make us think that the distant authority figures were pleasant and reasonable, and it was only the most proximate of our superiors that were assholes, being able to say they'd made an exception for me was not a bad move for that agenda.

At first, though, he was no more responsive than the lower-ranking flunkies. He was nicer about it, all smiles and apologies, but still made it very clear that I wasn't going to happen.

Then I happened to mention the name of the cousin whose wedding I wanted to go to. He went real quiet then, and then said he'd see what he could do. Less than an hour later, I had a paper giving me leave to go.

I grinned when I saw that. There are times when it's very nice to have friends in high places.

I showed up almost a day early, having taken a portal in to Wyoming and then hitchhiked the rest of the way. The hitchhiking had been easier than I expected; I'd gotten accustomed to a pretty shredded road system, but apparently it wasn't nearly as bad once you got outside of the city. There weren't nearly as many things running around causing trouble in the countryside.

Granted, there weren't nearly as many *defenses* on random highways in the countryside, either. I wouldn't have wanted to be the vanilla human driving cross-country through the backwoods of South

Dakota in the middle of the night. But given that I *wasn't* a vanilla human, it wasn't so much of a concern.

I did run into one trucker near the Wyoming border who had some inappropriate ideas of personal space. But there was always some chance of that when you were out hitching. Now that guys like that were zero threat to me, I was almost glad to see it. Dealing with sleazebags like that was a public service, and having a problem that I could solve at no risk was a nice change.

I made it into town at around midnight. It was late, but by some small miracle I was able to find a motel that was not only open but still had a room.

Six hours later, I shambled into the one restaurant in this backwater of a town. I was still fairly tired, but in a way that was a good thing. It meant my appalment at the poor food safety, sloppy cutting technique, and generally shoddy workmanship in the kitchen was more muted. And really, after several weeks of what was effectively boot camp, six hours of sleep felt pretty good. Decent food and all the coffee I wanted were just added luxuries on top.

The stadium was on the outskirts of town. It was smallish, more like a moderately sized amphitheater than a real stadium, and the raw, unfinished look wasn't exactly concealed, but I thought that was probably deliberate. It gave the place a feeling of newness, a sense of new beginnings and the start of things. It was a good aesthetic for the event, I thought.

I got there with about five hours to go before anything was scheduled to happen. There were already people running around, setting things up and getting ready. I recognized some of them as Winter's thugs; the rest looked like a mix of construction workers and professional specialists, caterers and the like.

I found someone who looked like she knew what she was doing and walked up. I recognized her vaguely as one of Winter's lieutenants, a demon of some sort; I hadn't spent much time with her, since by the time she was starting with him I was starting to drift away. But her appearance was memorable, and I thought I remembered her being competent.

"Hey," I said, walking up to her. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes," she said, sounding grateful. "Go check on the sound system? Last I knew they were doing sound checks, but I don't know how it turned out. It's right over there."

I hesitated. "You sure you want me near the electronics?" I asked. "I mean, things like that have a tendency to have...accidents when I'm around."

"We've got measures in place around the things that matter," she said. "Faraday cages and such. You won't be frying them unless you really try. And if you take out a few people's cell phones, that's more a feature than a bug. We don't want them taking pictures anyway."

I grinned. "All right then," I said. "I'll go and check on that for you."

Anna Rossi

I was pretty stunned when I got an invitation to Winter and Aiko's wedding. Not that I got an invite, necessarily; Winter and I were still pretty close friends, and I'd have been surprised and hurt if I *wasn't* invited. But the notion that they were getting married at all was somewhat bizarre. Not that they weren't great for each other and all, but if you'd asked me an hour before I got the note I'd have sworn up one side and down the other that neither one would *ever* get married. They just weren't the type that I'd have seen that coming from.

But then I opened the letter and saw the letter, and I was pretty glad I'd never actually placed a bet on the topic. There was no question that I was going; I'd have run there cross-country if I had to. Given that I'd been splitting time between Colorado and Wyoming for the last month and there were people heading out to the wedding from both locations, I pretty much had my choice of rides.

I ended up riding along with Edward, or running alongside the truck for a fair chunk of the distance. I was feeling too amped up to sit still the whole time, and there was some good terrain to run through. Edward was vaguely amused by the whole thing, but I wasn't that bothered. I was still new enough to the whole werewolf thing to get off on running through the countryside in fur, or riding with my head out the car window. If he was amused by that, that was fine with me; I wasn't shy. I'd spent long enough waiting for this that I wasn't going to waste time holding myself back because proper society wanted me to now.

And besides, there was no proper society anymore. Oh, it wasn't completely gone; I expected the influence of that much history was never really going to go away. But if I were to run into some asshole tomorrow and get into the usual arguments, I'd have as much claim to belong in the world as any of them.

I'm grinning into the wind as we drive through the night, the retrofitted stereo blasting *Ode to Joy* at a volume that has the woodland creatures fleeing in terror as we pass.

Conn Ferguson

One of the questions people ask me more often than almost any other is whether my long life has changed my outlook on the world.

Usually I ignore the question entirely, or else deflect it with some platitude. Because, of course, the answer is both obvious and inexpressible. Of course my perspective is different than that of some youth who is, from my perspective, little more than an infant. One does not live long enough to watch civilizations be born, rise to prominence, and crumble without having a different understanding of the world than someone who can count the decades they've seen on their fingers.

But how could I, how could anyone, hope to convey that perspective to someone for whom even a hundred years is an almost unimaginable gap of time? There's no way. It isn't simply a matter of quantitative difference. It's an experience, a feeling, a state of mind. I know many, many words, in many

languages, but I don't think I've ever seen a word that can fully encapsulate that feeling and pin it down, in any language I've ever heard.

And thus I don't bother answering the question, because there's no answer I could give that would make them really understand. There's no way to grasp that feeling unless you've experienced it, and if you have then you don't need anyone to explain it to you.

But if I wanted to convey the impression of that state of mind to someone, there were worse places to start than this. Watching one's child being married—and Winter was for all intents and purposes my child, for all that I was no more closely related to him than to any random person on the street—was as close as a human could really get to that feeling.

So if the person who asked had had that experience, and if I cared enough, I might tell them to start there. Start with the surge of pride and joy at seeing one's offspring make that step. Add in the sorrow you feel from seeing them take that great step away from being the child you remember them as, and the edge of guilt upon realizing that you're sorry to see them being happy and independent. Mix in the bittersweet recognition that all things are transient, that nothing is perfect and nothing lasts forever. Then, as the final touch of shade in the pigment, incorporate the quiet, delicate awareness that the world has moved on without you.

"Take that feeling," I might say, "and apply it to the whole world. That's what it's like to be me."

The few occasions I've said that, the people I'm talking to usually get real quiet and then make an excuse to stay far away from me in the future. Honestly, I can't blame them.

Most of the time, that part of me is kept hidden away, buried nice and deep under layers upon layers of masks. Most of the time I live so much in the present that even I can forget just how far back my life stretches.

Most of the time. The quiet, tragic happiness of this moment made it harder to hide.

I stood at the edge of the celebration, standing in the bright sun and thinking dark thoughts, and the crowd left a twenty-foot space around me without quite realizing why.

Edward Frodsham

After about a hundred years, I'd considered myself jaded. I saw enough in that time that not a lot could get a rise out of me. After around two hundred, there wasn't a whole lot left to see that I hadn't seen before. I could keep a reserved distance pretty much whatever came my way. In recent decades I'd made it something of a cornerstone of my public persona. Not showing any reaction, not seeming to really be impacted by anything, it was a key part of how I presented myself. Any Alpha needed to look strong, needed to seem like they could take on the world and walk away laughing. This was how I built that image, and even when something did get through to me I'd learned not to show it, to take it all casually and never admit that anything had made an impression.

When it came time for me to make a toast, I found that I was tearing up, my voice a little choked, and I couldn't find it in myself to really care.

Jacques

I sauntered up next to Cupcake and said, "You didn't invite me. I'm hurt."

She turned to me, her mouth full of—what else— a chocolate cupcake. "You're still here," she said, swallowing and licking a bit of frosting off her finger.

I snorted, causing a werewolf fifteen feet away to grimace without knowing why. "Come on, Cupcake," I said. "If I only went where I'm invited, I'd never leave my house."

"Point," she said. "So what are you doing here?"

"What, because I can't just want to wish you well on the big day?" I snorted, grabbed a glass of champagne off a passing caterer's tray and downed. "You wound me."

"Tell you what," she said. "I'll take it back if you tell me that's really the only reason you're here."

"You got me," I admitted. "Dropping off a delivery. It's over on the other table with the other gifts. I figured I'd stop and say hi while I was around. You got some more booze here?"

"Course," she said. "So is this delivery, like, a bomb or poison gas or something?"

"Would I do that to *you*?" I asked. "After all we've been through?"

"Of course you would," she said, without any hesitation.

"Well, no shit. But no, this isn't a trap. Just a gift as far as I know. Seriously, a bottle?"

She sighed and flagged down one of the servers. "Bring me a jug of absinthe," she said. He nodded and rushed off, and she turned back to me. "You really crashed this wedding just to deliver a gift? I know what the security was like here. You could have just waited until after the wedding."

"It's a wedding gift, not a fucking honeymoon gift. I'm supposed to deliver it during the wedding. This should be easy even for you to grasp, Cupcake."

"Why are you calling me that?" she asked, sounding vaguely curious. "We all know you know who I am. Why keep up the act?"

"It's courtesy," I said. "You told me to call you Cupcake, so that's what I'll call you. You tell me you want to be called the Cat in the Hat, I'll fucking call you that. It's basic etiquette, you see? Speaking of, give my best to whatsisface."

She rolled her eyes and pointed over my shoulder. "Your booze is on the way. See you around."

Kimiko

"I wouldn't have guessed that you were invited," the werewolf commented, grabbing a sandwich off the table. Kara, I thought her name was. I wasn't totally sure, since we'd only met the once and I'd had bigger things on my mind at the time. "Didn't seem like you and Aiko got along that well."

"Technically they didn't invite *me*," I said. "They sent an invitation to my boss, and he picked me to come as his representative. Without telling anyone in advance."

She grinned. "That's pretty choice."

"Yeah, he's actually got a pretty good sense of humor. It just doesn't show that often." I glanced at her. "So how've you been?"

The werewolf shrugged. "Not bad, not bad. Haven't been in town much recently. I started school again, now that I don't need to pretend I'm a human. It's a lot of work, trying to balance that with the pack, but it won't be that long before I graduate and start as an engineer. What about you?"

"Oh, I can't complain. Ever since I helped the boss take care of some upstarts last month, I've been practically the second-in-command. Moving up in the world, you know?" I grinned. "Plus the expression on those tengu's faces when they have to do what I tell them is *priceless*."

"I can imagine," she said, smiling back.

The conversation trailed off for a few minutes as we both ate until something caught my eye, and I just had to say something. "Is that a wolf walking around on two legs?" I asked.

She glanced in that direction. "Oh, yeah," she said. "That guy. He's some kind of faerie or something. I've hunted with him a couple of times."

"It looks like that werewolf is flirting with him," I commented.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Pretty clear there."

"And...that doesn't bother you?"

She shrugged. "Not really. Anna can make her own choices." She pursed her lips. "Although it would have been more tasteful to at least wait until after the ceremony before wandering off behind a building."

"It's a wedding," I said, also shrugging. "A certain amount of indiscretion is to be expected, I think. I'd be more concerned that she's getting involved with one of the fae."

"He seemed like an all right sort. And like I said, she can make her own decisions. I'm not responsible for the pack anymore." She grinned. "That was the best choice I ever made, I can tell you that."

"It's not for everyone," I agreed. Personally I didn't think I could have given that position up once I'd gotten it, but I could see that she wasn't the type to enjoy being in charge. Kyrie struck me as the sort that would much prefer a middle-management position of the sort I currently had—enough authority to set some rules, but with someone higher on the chain to kick problems up to when she didn't want to deal with it.

The conversation trailed off into silence again. This silence was somehow even more awkward than earlier, and it wasn't hard to see why. We'd just watched her friend drag some guy off for a quick roll in the metaphorical hay, and the last time we'd interacted had been to stage a scene involving the two of us making out in front of an audience. Her posture and expression made it fairly clear that these thoughts were at the forefront of her mind. Which, in turn, was awkward for me, for other reasons.

After a minute or so the tension got to the point that I felt a need to do something about it. From what I'd heard and my minimal personal experience, werewolves generally preferred straightforward means of resolving things, so I didn't beat around the bush.

"You're thinking about the last time we talked," I said.

"Yeah." Kari's voice was matter-of-fact, without any hesitation or hint of shame.

"So I don't know how to say this nicely," I said, not looking directly at her. "But I really only staged that for shock value. I'm not actually interested in going anywhere with it. Sorry."

"No problem," she said easily. She seemed totally casual, not reacting at all. I wondered how much of that was an act. "You mind if I ask why?"

"I'm not actually into girls," I said. "And I'm not into werewolves."

"Valid points," she said. She grabbed another sandwich off the table—her fifth, I was pretty sure, which was impressive even for a werewolf—and started to walk away. "I think the actual ceremony is starting soon," she said. "I should get going."

I watched her leave, and went off to make some more acquaintances on behalf of Kikuchi.

Kyra Walker

I still found it strange that Winter had asked me to be the best man. Or best person. Or whatever. Ryan had done the same thing, but I still didn't have a way to phrase it that wasn't clunky as hell.

"Are you serious?" I'd asked him, when he first proposed the idea. "Don't you know somebody who'd be a better pick for this? I mean, having a god backing you up would look a hell of a lot better than me."

"Screw that," he'd said cheerfully. "Politics has taken over the rest of my life. I'm not going to let it have this too. You're my best friend; ergo, you're the one who should be there. I mean, if you don't want it that's one thing, but I'm not picking someone else for the sake of politics or appearances."

And of course, after he'd said that I basically had to agree. Even though, if I was being entirely honest, I *didn't* want it. The idea of being a central part of this whole thing was terrifying. Being on display in front of these people, with all of the scariest people I'd ever seen staring at me? That was a frightening thought. The idea of being supposed to keep those people in line through the utter clusterfuck that any wedding between these two would inevitably become? That was worse.

It helped a little when one of his minions took me aside afterward and let me know that most of the peacekeeping duties would be taken care of by the numerous thugs that either had permanent positions in his organization or had been hired specially for this. Between the intense security, the political suicide involved in messing up this event, and the cosmic horror entailed in crossing some of the things who were attending, it was unlikely there would be any serious disturbances for me to resolve.

No, I was just supposed to manage the groom. And also the bride, since it wasn't like Aiko had someone to play my role on her side. Which was hideously uncomfortable on all sorts of levels, but I wasn't going to say so. As far as I knew Winter still hadn't caught on to all that, and at this point I'd rather spend several hours being cut with a silver knife before skinny dipping in a swimming pool full of lemonade than be the one to explain it to him.

Thus started a solid month of ridiculous bullshit. There were seven brawls, two assassination attempts, and three major fires, two of which were started by the pending couple. Their courtship had always involved plenty of pranks, and having observed it from the start I wasn't exactly surprised when that continued to be the case.

Both of them were trying to top themselves for the special event, so naturally it fell to me to keep things from getting a little too real. I was the one who had to step in and tell Aiko that she should probably stick to augmenting Winter's soup with chilies rather than monkshood, since even if he could shrug off the effects it was not a great idea to have poison out in a restaurant where normal people ate. When he went to get her back, I was the one who had to point out that slashing her tires was probably a more appropriate prank than cutting the brake lines.

I was the one who had to plan both the bachelor party *and* the bachelorette party. Then, when both sides independently decided to crash the other's party, and asked me to make it happen, I was the one who at the last minute had to arrange a *third* party for them to simultaneously interrupt so that they could each think that they'd been the one to pull the clever scheme off. I had to arrange food and drink for a group that could eat an entire restaurant out of stock. I knew that, because I'd *bought* an entire restaurant's stock, and I still had to make an emergency snack run halfway through the night.

I'd never seen Aiko drunk before; predictably, though, she was an unholy terror in that state. I'd set up the party at the most open-minded club I'd ever been to in the city, and provided both warnings

and generous payment in advance. But when she really got going, I still had to rush to management with reassurances and another several thousand dollars to keep from getting thrown out. Even the *stripper* got fed up with it and walked out, thus removing the only pleasant aspect of the evening for me. She was good at her job and I was confident she'd seen some intense shit before, but not even an experienced stripper was able to handle Aiko when the kitsune really got on a roll.

Predictably enough, the next morning was not an easy one. Aiko was too hungover to stand unaided, and while Winter wasn't hungover, that wasn't exactly a good thing. It had never really occurred to me that there might be a reason the groom was customarily too wasted to see straight on the night before the wedding. Now that I had one who was effectively incapable of getting drunk, I found out the hard way that a sober groom was a groom who could express his last-minute cold feet, uncertainty, and fear of commitment. And the whole time I was listening to him and nodding sympathetically, I was mostly thinking that I hadn't gotten any sleep and I'd been on my feet for the last twelve hours and I'd have gladly shanked someone for the chance to take a nap.

The club owner came in around dawn to herd us out so they could clean the place up. I'd never seen a woman that short and wearing that little look quite that pissed before. I couldn't really blame her, either. Considering what the place looked like, I couldn't blame her. I'd seen some wild parties going on here, but I'd never seen the club look quite this demolished. I'd slipped her another two grand of Winter's money and started the process. With a mixture of shouting, shaking, and cold water, I managed to get the revelers up and moving, even if they had to lean on each other and half-carry each other out the door.

The portals were hellish, as usual, and it took me a solid fifteen minutes to recover once we got to South Dakota. I managed to get a solid two hours of sleep before the festivities started, and then went out to get some breakfast. It took half a gallon of coffee to even begin to clear my head—of all the consequences of becoming a werewolf, I hated the resistance to caffeine more than almost anything.

I was immensely grateful, as the massive celebration surrounding the wedding started, that I wasn't responsible for keeping order. In the first few hours, before Winter and Aiko even got involved in things, I saw no less than seven major fights break out. Three of them escalated far enough that people got killed or worse than killed before someone managed to break things up. I got mixed up in two of them at least, although luckily I managed to get out of them without anything really serious happening.

I got shut down by Kimiko before that even got off the ground, and then spent a solid half hour freaking out trying to find the bride, since she'd went out for donuts on a whim. It was like ten minutes before she was supposed to be appearing in public and we were on the verge of sending out a search party when she came back, with frosting on her lips. I damn near strangled her on the spot, and I seriously doubt I was alone, and from the expression on Aiko's face she damn well *knew* it.

I managed to throw on the tuxedo and scramble out in time to stand on the dais next to Winter when I was supposed to. My smile when the orchestra struck up *O Fortuna* and Aiko started down the aisle was sincere. If it owed as much to the prospect of getting back to my regular life as it did to joy at the happiness of my friends, I didn't think I could be blamed for that.

All I had to do now was get through the ceremony itself, and the reception, and probably a couple of afterparties, and the trip back, and I'd be home free. With luck I'd be able to get through at least a semester before their unique brand of psycho took over my life again.

Miyake Kuzunoha

Of all the things I'd never dreamed to see, my daughter's wedding was one of those I had wanted most. But it had become clear fairly early on that it was a scene that was unlikely to happen, and I had resigned myself to that knowledge. It was not what I would have preferred, but I could recognize that different people had different needs. I had spent long enough trying to force her into a different mold to drive her away. Now that there was finally some chance of her returning, at least in part, I wasn't going to make the same mistake again. I hadn't even mentioned the topic to her.

Then I got her message. It was possibly the greatest surprise I'd had since I received the message from her impostor. She'd been in contact with me to some extent since returning, but this news came as a complete surprise.

At first I had reacted somewhat impulsively, insisting that the wedding be held in Japan. Her reaction had been understandably poor. I managed to settle that unfortunate first response and approach the discussion more reasonably, and ended the conversation on a positive note.

Until the ceremony actually started, I wasn't entirely sure it wasn't a prank. I loved Aiko, but she had always taken after her father in that way. Neither of them had always been able to restrict their jokes to within reasonable boundaries. Even if that had been the case, I'd have been glad. Since we started talking again, our relationship had been delicate and fragile. For her to start her practical jokes again would be a good sign.

But then the ceremony did start, and I felt even more pleased. True, it was not all that I might have asked. It was held in a stadium with a thousand guests in attendance, most of whom I didn't approve of in the least. The vows were said in pig Latin, and most of them made practically no sense at all. Not that long ago I'd even have said that her choice of husband was inappropriate, but having met him and seen that he was truly dedicated to her, I was more ambivalent.

For all of that, though, it was still something I'd hoped to see and never expected. I was smiling widely as it happened.

Selene

Winter and Aiko finished the ceremony, which was conducted by a nontheistic priest who did an admirable job of not making any kind of reference to a deity or religion of any kind, and then they walked into the back room of the stadium.

I stood and watched, paying more attention to the crowd than to the couple. I was mostly concerned that somebody would do something stupid, like plan an assassination during the ceremony. That turned out to be a pretty reasonable concern, since some moron *did*. I spotted him pulling out a

rifle and assembling it, and sent a handful of people to deal with it. A pair of hired thugs grabbed him and politely escorted him out of the stadium. Once outside, out of sight, they would keep him to be interrogated. It was conceivably possible that it had been just an honest mistake, or that he was worried someone else would try to start a fight and he wanted to be ready for it.

Possible. Unlikely, but possible. If that was the case, he'd be kept in custody until the celebration was over and then let go.

If not, he was going to have a very bad day that would probably end with him dying. Winter and Aiko had limited patience and itchy trigger fingers at the best of times, and if there was anything that would provoke a violent response from them it was this.

That was the only disturbance. By some miracle, they actually did get through the vows and the ceremony. Finally, when I was almost twitchy with the tension, they wrapped it up and went off the stage. Dais. Thing. Whatever it was that that part of the area was supposed to be called.

The plan called for them to be in back for a few minutes before coming back out for the reception. Now that the wedding was over the party would start and probably go for a solid twelve to fifteen hours. The entertainment would start with the orchestra playing "Ride of the Valkyries" as Winter and Aiko left. After that there were comedians, more music from the orchestra and a handful of other bands, a couple of dance troupes, fireworks—we'd really pulled out all the stops. It was, essentially, a display of power. It was the same reason the rich and powerful had always thrown massive, over-the-top parties. We did it because we could, as a way of announcing that we could afford it, that we had the wealth and power to pull it off. It was conspicuous consumption on a grand scale, the same as any other large wedding.

Or, at least, that was the plan. As usual, the plan didn't survive long.

As the first song wrapped up, a figure appeared on the stage thing. She was tall and beautiful, and one glance was all it took for me to know what she was. It wasn't just her looks, although those were undeniably useful to confirm what I would have known without them. Her posture, her expression, her clothing, all of them pointed to the same conclusion. We were in similar lines of work.

"You didn't invite the wicked godmother," she said, turning and looking at the crowd. "How foolish of you. Perhaps I should curse this union."

Winter and Aiko still weren't back, and nobody seemed to be in a great hurry to deal with the situation. So after a few seconds, I reluctantly stepped up out of my little office area. "If you feel that you should have been invited and weren't, we can discuss reparations," I called.

"I am a lady of the Midnight Court," she said. "I do not *discuss*."

"Oh, you're with the Court," I said, grinning. "We invited a bunch of you from the Midnight Court," I continued, raising my voice so that they would be sure to hear me. "I saw that some of you

arrived, but I'm sure not all of you that came signed in. So I'm going to just put this out there. Which of you is ranked highly enough to take care of this?"

After a second or two, my attention was drawn to a woman about halfway up the northern side of the seating. I wasn't sure why, exactly. She wasn't that remarkable in appearance, a small woman so completely shrouded in black cloth that I wasn't sure how I even knew she was female. She hadn't done anything either, not even stood up. There was just a sudden feeling of *presence* to her, her magic pressing heavy on the world. Judging by the way that about ninety-five percent of the people in the stadium turned to face her at the exact same time, I didn't think I was alone.

The woman who'd appeared and started throwing around meaningless threats saw who everyone was looking at, and froze. Instants later she vanished as quickly as she'd appeared, and the strange gravity that had drawn every eye in the place was gone.

I grinned, briefly, and then went back to managing the party.

Serval

"I'm sorry," I whispered, gentle as a dead leaf falling to the ground. I rolled the words across my tongue, tasting them. I seldom said them, or anything like them. Their feel was alien on my lips, the sentiment even more so behind them.

I stepped past the guard when his back was turned, slid under a table, wove a quick magic to fog another man's mind at a critical moment, and slid past the camera on the door. The lock opened with a quick twist of magic and I stepped inside, closing the door behind myself before the guard turned back to look. Another quick bit of magic locked the door again as I left. It wasn't necessary, but I prided myself on being neat.

I could hear them. I could hear their beating hearts, quick and excited. I could hear their breathing, the floor creaking beneath their feet. It made it easy to find my quarry, even though I'd never been here before.

I heard them laugh, and a smile danced across my face before it died. Good. It was good they were laughing. It was good they were happy. That eased the sting.

I followed the noise, my own steps silent in a way that very few people had ever managed. I found the room they were in without much trouble, and stood against the wall for a moment to watch them. They were laughing, joking, talking. Eating what smelled like a chocolate cake. They were touching each other to a degree that seemed unnecessary.

I realized that I was flipping a knife around in my hand, rolling it across my knuckles, and forced myself to stop. It was a nervous habit. It was unnecessary. I would not require a knife. I returned it to its sheath, where I could get at it quickly if my opinion of its necessity changed.

"I'm sorry," I said, just loud enough for the two of them to hear, as I let myself fade back in to visibility.

Tindr the Exile

"How much did we spend on this again?" I asked, watching the festivities.

"Nineteen million," the accountant replied. "Although much of that was covered by other parties. Add in the expected financial value of gifts, and the net loss was only around five million."

I winced. She chuckled dryly.

"How long has it been since the ceremony finished?" I asked absently after a few minutes.

"Twenty-one minutes," she replied instantly.

I frowned. "They should have been back by now," I said absently.

"Should we contact Selene?"

I shook my head. "No. She'll already know. In any case, there isn't much to do. If something managed to get past all the security and beat the two of them, I don't think there's anything the likes of us can do about it."

Winter

Aiko hit the accelerator, and the Lamborghini went from ninety to one-fifty in a few seconds.

"Watch it," I said absently. "I almost spilled my tea."

She took one hand off the wheel to punch me in the ribs without looking. "Deal with it," she said. "I've got a wide-open highway and a Lamborghini. If you think I'm sticking to double digits, you're deluding yourself."

"That's a fair point," I acknowledged, leaning towards the window and squinting against the wind. I caught her hand and held it for a moment before letting go; I was reckless, not suicidal, and distracting the driver at this kind of speed was a great way to end up very, very dead. "I still can't quite believe Serval came to apologize for overreacting back when you left."

"It's pretty in character for her," Aiko said. "She was always...eh. She's got even less of an idea how normal people work than I do. To Serval, that probably seemed like a reasonable way of delivering the message. The fact that she just about gave me a heart attack would just be a nice bonus."

"You going to follow up on it?"

She shrugged, fiddling with the stereo. She didn't answer until a Viking metal song was on, blasting loud enough to have royally pissed off any other drivers on the road, if there were any. "Maybe," she said at last. "I'll think about it. We were pretty good friends back then, and she was a

better person than most of my friends from that time in my life. It's worth considering, but I don't really know if I want the reminder of who I was back then."

"Fair enough. So when do you think they'll figure out that we aren't coming back for the party?"

"If they haven't already figured it out, they're probably too dim to understand if you told them to their faces," Aiko said dryly. "But I figure they'll deal. We already paid for the party. If they were expecting us to actually stay for it, that's on them."