

Amount of time it took to get my hair ready for Jake and Carson's wedding: three hours.

Amount of time it took a flock of fairies to have at it: five minutes.

The little knuckleheads divebombed me the minute Jude and I got out of her truck at the Golden Gardens bathhouse. One minute I was closing the passenger door behind me, taking care not to crinkle my skirt as I got out, because honestly, how often was I going to wear a dress in public? I'd been twitchy the whole morning about tearing it, or spilling coffee on it, or any number of potential disasters. The next minute, my field of vision filled with a disaster I hadn't counted on: the glittering, swooping bodies of seven fairies, all of whom seemed more pleased to see me than I'd ever seen fairies be about anything. And that counted the time I'd bribed half a dozen of them to find my phone. With red velvet cupcakes. They'd brought me three other phones before I'd finally convinced them that no, really, my own phone was enough.

"Queen!" one of them caroled as it whirled around my head, so quickly that I got barely a glimpse of flashing wings and tiny flailing hands. "Queen is here!"

"Flowers for queen!" cried another, while it and two more showered me with flower petals. Random ones, as far as I could tell. Blossoms of half a dozen hues fell onto my hair and the shoulders of my jacket, while aromas of rose, lavender, and at least three others I couldn't immediately identify assaulted my sense of smell—far more sensitive now than it'd been six months before when my faerie blood had awakened. I might not have objected, given that I'd come to find flowers a far more pleasant scent than asphalt, car emissions, and the countless other odors that made up the fabric of life in a modern city. But the

fairies landed on my hair along with the flowers. Their voices piped shrilly in my ears on either side of my head, while minuscule hands started tugging at my braids.

It didn't hurt. Yet it was a significant step up in irritation from your average cloud of gnats, and Jude and I *had* spent the entire morning wrangling my unruly mane into orderly box braids, each secured with gold beads, and a topknot to finish it off. "Quit it," I demanded, spinning first one way and then the next. Could I swat them off my head without smacking myself in the face? Or worse, wrecking the work we'd done on my hair?

Jude, so poker-faced that she might as well have had 'inside straight' written across her forehead, was no help. "Aw, *chica*, maybe they're just trying to help. Besides, did you check the guest list? Jake or Carson might have invited them."

"Wedding!" squealed a fairy, promptly setting off the rest of them.

"Party!"

"Foxes!"

"Cake! Cake cake cake!"

"Party and cake and foxes and flowers for queen and cake!"

I managed to catch the smallest of the flock, a creature barely three inches tall, and scowled at it while it flittered in agitation. My grasp wasn't tight; fairies weren't as fragile as the butterflies they resembled, but that didn't mean I actually wanted to squish one in my fist. No matter how tempting the prospect was in that immediate moment. "The party is for Jake and Carson," I said sternly, "and the cake is for them and all the guests. If I catch any of you going for the cake before anyone else has a chance to have some, especially Jake and

Carson, I swear I will set each and every one of you on fire.”

All seven fairies froze in whatever positions they'd been in, most hovering in the air around me, one on my left shoulder, and the last one clinging to one of my braids. Seven dime-sized faces, with eyes as wildly varied in hue as the flowers they'd strewn all over me, gazed at me in abject disappointment.

“Caaaaaake,” they chorused in protest, before one of them got the bright idea to point at itself and ask hopefully, “Guest?”

Which, of course, set them all off again.

“Guest!”

“Guest!”

“Cake for guests!”

The guest list for my housemates' wedding did in fact have fey on it—mostly *kitsune*. Most of these were the Tanaka clan, Jake's extended family, turning out in force in support of them. The rest were the Asakuras, a much smaller family, Makiko Asakura, her two sons, and her seven-year-old daughter. Their presence at the wedding was a little controversial; they were *nogitsune*, while Jake and his family were *myobu*. Even after knowing Jake for several years, I still wasn't entirely versed on the nuances of why the *myobu* and the *nogitsune* tended to hate each other. But Makiko and her children had helped us save the city a few months before, and accordingly, Jake had insisted on inviting them.

Given that little Saeko Asakura was not only half dragon, but was in fact what we'd had to save Seattle from when a malevolent spirit called a bone walker had possessed her, I strongly suspected the Tanakas had decided diplomacy was the better part of valor. Saeko hadn't shown any sign of being

dangerous since the incident, but she *did* take after her dragon side far more than her *kitsune* one. And even though she was only seven years old, her dragon form was twenty feet long and capable of destroying a city. Most of the Tanakas, from what I'd heard, had scrambled to figure out how to avoid pissing the kid off. Jake and Carson, bless their hearts, had sidestepped the question entirely by inviting Saeko to be their flower girl.

Diplomacy, too, had led the boys to invite a small number of Sidhe. They'd sent invitations to three Seelie: the warrior Melisanda ana'Sharran, who'd helped us with that whole saving the city thing; her brother Tarrant, who was less sanguine about dealing with the mortal world than Melisanda was; and last but not most assuredly not least, Amelialoren herself, the Queen of Wind and Morning, monarch of the Seelie Court. All had declined. I wouldn't miss Tarrant much, but Melisanda at least had sent a regretful handwritten reply on behalf of herself and her brother, citing certain important priorities keeping those who served House Kirlath in Faerie. A similar letter had come from the Queen's seneschal, expressing Amelialoren's regrets that she could not attend and her congratulations for the happy couple; with that, there'd been a handsomely wrapped gift with just the faintest resonance of magic about it. This had proven to be an exquisite statuette of a three-tailed *kitsune*, crafted from white wood, so smooth of line that its shape looked as though it'd been grown rather than carved. For all I knew of Sidhe sculpture, it had.

With the greatest trepidation, the boys had also invited Luciriel, Queen of the Unseelie Court. Not that any of us really wanted Luciriel to show up—but we'd all grown up on the tale of Sleeping Beauty. We were all very clear on the concept of how foolish it was to leave one powerful fey out of your party if you

were going to invite the rest. To our relief, Luciriel had also declined to attend. None of us had as of yet been quite brave enough to open her gift.

That left exactly one full-blooded Sidhe in attendance: Elessir a’Natharion, renegade bard of the Unseelie Court as well as my teacher in magic. Because the last fey coming to the wedding was, well, *me*. I was what many Sidhe of both Courts called a changeling, half human and half Sidhe, but inheriting my Seelie mage mother’s power along with her blood. It made me far more interesting than I cared to consider to both the Seelie and Unseelie Courts. And as of late, the fairy flocks in Seattle had gotten in on that action too. I’d barely been able to set foot outside without attracting half a dozen of them. Like now.

Lucky, lucky me.

“You can be guests if and *only* if you behave,” I said. Since nobody was in immediate sight except Jude, I risked tapping into just enough of my magic to let a trace of power swirl around the finger I pointed scoldingly at my tiny admirers. I wouldn’t actually set any of them on fire—that would amount to kicking puppies, if puppies were sparkly and airborne—but they didn’t need to know that. “No cake until I say so. Got it?”

“You know,” Jude put in helpfully, “if you all do promise to behave, I’m sure the queen would let you put all kinds of flowers in her hair. What kind of a queen would she be without a crown?”

All seven fairies lit up. Literally, because fairies sparkle even harder when they’re happy, and this bunch started flashing like a string of overexcited Christmas lights at my best friend’s suggestion. While they started babbling a flurry of high-pitched syllables at me, a barrage which admittedly did contain

the word 'behave', I shot Jude a dirty look. She beamed back at me, secure in her assurance that I would no more demote her from 'best friend' status than I would ignite the flock. "Yes," I said through gritted teeth, "you may put flowers in my hair. If. You. Behave."

"And cake?" piped three of the fairies in unison.

*God, the boys are going to owe me for this.* "And cake," I conceded. "And if any other fairies show up, the same applies to them. No cake unless you all behave. Tell them."

"Okay okay okay cake! Cake! Cake!"

With squeals of utmost delight, the fairies vanished. This left Jude and me a chance, at last, to scurry for the front entrance of the bathhouse so that we could get inside and join the others. We didn't make it ten feet through the parking lot before the fairies returned, in a swirl of opalescent wings and loose drifting petals, and came in for a landing all over my head. Their hands pulled once more at my braids, fast and light, and I could only set my jaw and pray they weren't going to make three hours' worth of work go completely to waste.

A few other guests were milling around outside, waiting for the ceremony to start. Two of them were older Japanese men, relatives of Jake's that I didn't know, standing well away from the building's main entrance as they took a chance to smoke. But the others were the Asakura boys and their little sister, clad with the same formal care that Jude and I had both taken for the occasion. Ryuji and Hiroshi took turns playing tag with Saeko, who ran back and forth between them with a seven-year-old's boundless energy, heedless of how her obi was coming untied at the waist of her kimono.

"Hey, Ryuji, Hiroshi, Saeko, incoming," Jude called out, which got them

all to look up. The boys, on the verge of coming out of their teens, were shyer and more reserved than their sister; they simply smiled and called back their own greetings, at least until they both blinked at the sight of the fairies clustered atop my hair.

Saeko, however, cried out happily and charged straight for me, arms out for a hug. “Kendis!” I let her plow straight into me, both physically and magically; ever since the incident with the bone walker, she’d taken to me as one of the few adults of her acquaintance who could stand the proximity of even a fraction of her power.

The happy side effect of this: as soon as she came within arm’s reach, the fairies squeaked and disappeared from my head once more. Not fast enough that Saeko didn't spot them, though. Her eyes went round, and then she pointed up at my braids, giggling. “They put flowers in your hair.”

Her expression shone with childish glee. Her innate magic shone even brighter, almost visible to my half-Sidhe senses, and adding considerable warmth to the salt-tanged breeze blowing in from Elliott Bay. “They sure did, kiddo,” I said. I couldn't help but smile.

“Are you going to be a flower girl too?”

“Sure, why not?” My actual part in the ceremony was going to be ‘best woman’, since for generally obvious reasons Jake and Carson wouldn't have bridesmaids. But if it made Saeko happy, I was for it. “If you think you need the help.”

“I don't think so, Mommy taught me all about what I need to do, but it’ll be more fun if you do it too. Come on, Kendis! Come see my flowers!”

With every bit as much eagerness as the fairies, she grabbed both my

hands and tugged me towards the bathhouse's doors. I let her pull me along, aware that Jude, Ryuji, and Himiko were all grinning. All at once I didn't mind that the fairies had probably made a shambles of my braids, or that I had flower petals strewn all up and down my coat. I was surrounded by friends. Two more were about to get married.

The doors opened before we reached them, and the tall, rangy figure of Christopher MacSimidh stepped through. My heart leapt at the sight of him. He was Jake and Carson's best man, alongside me as best woman—and as he was certainly *my* best man, I couldn't be more proud. Christopher had on a tux that flattered his broad shoulders. I'd never seen him look handsomer, even as his hazel eyes went wide at the state of my hair.

“Kenna-lass, what in the world...?”

“Don't ask.” I let Saeko keep one of my hands, but gave Christopher the other. “Let's just say there are many sacrifices I'm willing to make for the sanctity of cake.”

“Come on, Kendis! Come on, Christopher!”

Saeko barreled on through the doors, pulling us along in her wake. We laughed and let her do it, since after all, we wanted to go the same direction she did. There was important business before us all.

We had a wedding to attend.