Married In Green

An InCryptid Story
Married in Green

by

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Married in white, you've chosen all right;
Married in blue, your love is true.
Married in green, you'll not long be seen...

--Traditional wedding rhyme.

Buckley Township, Michigan, 1932

Frances Brown--soon to be Frances Healy, assuming the minister showed up and was still willing to perform the ceremony with her in her current condition--turned to study her profile in the bedroom mirror, smoothing her dress down over her swollen stomach with the heels of her hands. “I feel like just about every cautionary tale in the book right now,” she said, to no one in particular. “Don’t talk to strange men who hunt monsters, little girl, or you’ll wind up pregnant, unmarried, and stranded in Michigan.”

The mice, who had been sitting on the bed watching her raptly for the past several hours, let out a cheer. Fran sighed.

“Guess I just committed another proverb,” she said, and turned away from the mirror, leveling a finger at the enthusiastic rodents. “Now see here, you lot. Don’t you go thinking I regret this baby. I was poking fun at myself, not trying to write scripture, and I’m too damn pregnant for you to mess with. You got me?”

“Yes, Priestess,” chorused the mice dutifully.

Fran sighed again. Even after four years of living with the Aeslin mice, she could never quite tell when they were going to take her irritation seriously. “Well, you’re going to do what you’re going to do, but what I’m going to do is head on down for supper.”

“Will you be joining us for evening services, Priestess?” squeaked one of the mice, a sleek female dressed in a cloak made from one of Fran’s worn-out flannel shirts.

It was a serious question. It deserved a serious answer. “I don’t know yet,” said Fran, honestly. “My feet are hurting me, and I spent so much of the morning asleep that I didn’t get in any target practice, so I was thinkin’ I might go out and throw a few knives around before bedtime, if the light holds. How about I tell you after I eat? I promise I’ll at least try.”

“That is all we ever ask, Priestess,” said the mouse, and bowed. The rest of the mice did the same.

Fran smiled. “Y’all are the best thing about this family, and don’t you ever forget it,” she said.

The cheering of the mice followed her out of the room.

If either Enid or Alexander had been surprised when Jonathan and Fran came back from Boggsville, Colorado engaged to be married, well, they were smart enough not to have said anything. Fran was reasonably sure they’d been expecting the engagement since Jonathan brought her home. Wasn’t their fault
their son didn’t know how to recognize a good thing until he almost lost it. As for the wedding...

Fran rested a hand atop her stomach and smiled. One thing after another had come up—sometimes several times in the same night. Between the giant monster bats and the people with snakes for hair, things just kept getting pushed back, until the day she had to admit that maybe she was throwing up all the time for a reason. Maybe that should have made them hurry, but it was spring, and the monster hunting business was always in high demand in the summer. So she’d just unfastened her belt and loosened up her shirts, until the day when even she had to admit that wasn’t working anymore.

Enid had taken her son aside the very next day. “Johnny, I love you,” she’d said, “but my grandchild is getting ready to arrive in this world, and I’d really rather that baby have the family name. Now are you going to marry the girl, or are you dumber than I raised you to be?”

They’d set a date for the wedding the very next day.

Wedding. Fran smiled as she made her way laboriously down the stairs. Four people and a minister from the Unitarian church in Ann Arbor did not a proper wedding make. But the Healys didn’t really go in much for socializing with the townsfolk, and most of those same townsfolk thought she was a woman of questionable virtue before she let herself get near to the end of her pregnancy without being legally wed. Fran would have been happy with a trip to the county clerk’s office and a piece of paper. Heck, Fran would have been happy claiming to have been married in Colorado.

Enid, again, had been having none of it. “Weddings are a form of ritual, and ritual protects you,” that was her position on the whole matter. So it was going to be a wedding, whether her son and soon-to-be daughter-in-law wanted it or not.

Fran reached the bottom step and paused to catch her breath, pressing her hand down against the small boulder that had replaced her stomach. “Between you and me, kiddo, I’d skip the wedding entire if it would get you out of me a little sooner. Can’t wait to meet you, pretty darn tired of carrying you around like this.”

“It always feels like that by the time you hit the last few months, I promise,” said Enid. Fran looked up to see her future mother-in-law smiling at her from the kitchen doorway. “Come on and sit down. I have a surprise for you.”

“I sure do hope that surprise is getting married without standing up again,” said Fran, and followed Enid into the kitchen.

The woman who was sitting at the scarred oak kitchen table looked up and smiled as Fran entered. It was a less vigorous expression than Enid’s, worn by a face that had done its share of smiling falsely for the crowds. Her hair was too black to be that color naturally, and while she wasn’t wearing any makeup, her features somehow gave the impression that they should be caked with foundation and eyeliner. She was wearing traveling clothes, old jeans and an off-the-shoulder peasant blouse that hadn’t been in style for a hundred years or more.

“Juniper?” asked Fran, wide-eyed.

The woman called Juniper stood, spreading her arms. “Hello, Frannie. It’s been a long time.” Her eyes dipped to Fran’s belly, and her smile turned amused. “How you’ve grown.”

“Juney!” Fran crossed the kitchen with a speed she hadn’t known she was still capable of, throwing her arms around as much of Juniper as she could. Juniper laughed and hugged her back, and for a moment, they just stood there, holding each other.
Juniper smelled like grass, honest dirt...and sawdust. Fran lifted her head, eyes going wide again.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, not letting go. “Last I heard you were still out west.”

“Yes, with the show.” Juniper stepped back. Fran disentangled herself from the other woman reluctantly. “Things have changed since Paul died.”

“I suppose that would be true,” said Fran cautiously.

Paul Campbell had been the owner of the Campbell Family Circus, where Fran was a trick rider and Juniper told fortunes under the name “Madame Geneva.” Times were hard for an independent circus. He’d been desperate to save his flagging show, and so he’d bought a baby Questing Beast, intending to raise it as the best sideshow exhibit the world had ever seen. Instead, it killed a bunch of people, and tried to kill Jonathan. Fran had killed it before it had the chance--and when Paul tried to finish the job, she’d killed him, too.

Jonathan had taken her away from the circus the very next day.

Juniper smiled sadly at the look on Fran’s face. “We all know you killed him, sweetheart, and yes, some folks were mad at you for a little while. But the cards told me you had reason, and when Elmer went looking for what that reason was, he found everything. Paul was a good man, but by the time you killed him, he wasn’t a man anymore. He was a monster.”

Fran paused, blinking. “You mean you think he was a werewolf?” she asked hesitantly.

“Not quite,” said Juniper. “I mean we know he bought some sort of beast-thing that ate a bunch of folks, and since you and your new boyfriend were the last ones to see him alive, it wasn’t hard to figure out what the cards were telling me. Elmer found the man who sold him the monster. The cards told me that what you did was self-defense.”

“Oh!” said Fran. It felt like a weight she hadn’t even realized she was carrying had suddenly been lifted from her shoulders. The circus didn’t hate her! She could go and visit the only family she’d ever really been a part of! She started to throw her arms around Juniper again and stopped as the weight of the burden she was still carrying pressed hard against her bladder. “...ow,” she finished.

“That baby’s about ready to join the show,” said Juniper. “Boy or girl, do you think?”

“From the way it kicks, I’m bettin’ it’s a boy,” said Fran. “But Juney, what are you doing here? What do you mean, things have changed?”

“Well, for a start, we’re not a circus anymore.”

Fran clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh, Juney, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be, sugar-pumpkin! Come over here. I’ve got something to show you.” She took Fran’s arm and tugged her toward the back door. Feeling obscurely like a very large balloon on a string, Fran allowed herself to be led.

Enid slipped in front of them at the last moment, opening the door and freeing Juniper to pull Fran out onto the back porch. It was a narrow square of wood, barely large enough for both women to stand side-by-side.

Fran gaped. Juniper put an arm around her shoulder, squeezing as she waved her free hand in an all-encompassing gesture.
“Frannie, I’d like to introduce you to the Campbell Family Carnival,” she said.

For once in her life, Frances Brown couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“Careful now,” cautioned Enid, standing at the top of the porch steps and watching as Juniper led Fran down into the back field. “Remember your delicate condition.”

“Ma’am, I assure you, between me and your son, there ain’t nothin’ about this baby that’s delicate,” Fran replied, but her heart wasn’t in the talking back. She was too busy staring at the spectacle in front of her.

The Healy family home was built on the very edge of Buckley Township, barely close enough to their nearest neighbors to qualify as living in town. There was a stretch of open land the size of a football field between the house and the edge of the forest. Most of the time, they kept it clear, beating down the weeds to keep any of the less friendly native wildlife from becoming overly interested in dropping by for a visit. Now, however...

Somehow, while she’d been sleeping, an entire carnival had sprung up where that open space would normally be. Fran recognized some of the attractions—half the midway was familiar, and she’d helped to assemble that Ferris wheel more times than she could reasonably count. Others were new.

“When did we get a merry-go-round?” she asked incredulously.

“Sold the elephants,” said Juniper, leading her forward.

The smell of popcorn and frying sugar assaulted her nose, and she was instantly hungry, even though she would have sworn five minutes ago that she was done eating until after the baby came. “But you loved the elephants!”

“We bought them back for half what we got for them a season later, when the zoo we’d sold them to figured out that they weren’t going to play nicely with the other animals,” said Juniper, with a wicked grin. “Just a few tricks like that and it became surprisingly easy to spruce ourselves up. It’s still an act in progress, of course. And we’ve never managed to replace our star attraction.”

“Oh, hush you,” said Fran. Inwardly, she was glowing—and that glow just got brighter when they reached the midway, and for the first time in four years, there was her family, waiting for her.

Oh, not all of them—a few faces were missing, and a few faces were new, and a few faces bore scowls instead of welcoming smiles—but enough that, for the first time since people in town had started to point out the expanding balloon of her belly, she actually felt like she was standing in a place that she could call her home.

“We’ve missed you,” whispered Juniper.

Fran beamed, clasping her hands together beneath her chin, and cried for joy.

It took well over an hour for Fran to say hello to everyone, meet the people she didn’t know, and hug the
ones she did. At some point, a paper plate holding a fresh funnel cake was pressed into her hand, dripping with grease and powdered sugar. She ate every bite, and sucked her fingers until not a drop of sweetness remained behind. The baby kicked, and she laughed and asked for cotton candy.

“It’s for the baby,” she said.

Everyone else laughed, and the introductions and remembrances went on.

Finally, after there were no more hands to shake or necks to hug, Juniper put a hand on Fran’s arm and tugged her gently away. “You’re swaying like a reed,” she said. “Come on, Frannie. We’ll all still be here in the morning, and I’m afraid that mother-in-law of yours will kill me if I don’t make you sit down for a spell.”

“I just...how did you do this? How did you all...?” Fran let herself be led, once again giving in to the urge to stare in wide-eyed wonder at everything around her.

“Put all the blame on that fiancé of yours. He’s the one who figured out what our route was, sent the invitations, arranged for permits for us to operate here in town for the next week, and paid our travel costs.” Juniper’s smile couldn’t have looked smugger if she’d tried. “If you weren’t marrying him, Fran, I’d be tempted to make a try for him. He’s a little stuffy, but he surely thinks the moon of you.”

“Johnny did all this? My Johnny?” Fran’s expression didn’t lose any of its wonder, but it did gain a certain edge of understanding. “That’s why he kept putting off marrying me, the snake. And why his mama let him.”

“He just wanted you to have your family here. You can’t blame him for that.”

“Blame him? I want to kiss him until he remembers how he got me pregnant! This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me.” They had walked past the end of the midway and were moving toward the other side of the house. Fran brightened when she saw the ramshackle assortment of trailers and trucks parked just past the barn. “The boneyard!”

“Like I said. We’re here for a bit.” Juniper smiled again. “Wait until you see what I’ve done with your old trailer.”

Fran blinked. “You have my trailer?”

“Sure do. Couldn’t let a stranger take it, could I?” The pair walked past the first of the trailers, passing the invisible boundary that separated the carnival--public space, meant for tourists and townies--from the private, family-only space of the boneyard. It was a morbid name for something that wasn’t morbid at all. It was the comfortable hidden face of home, the flannel sheets and hot stew, rather than the pretty flash and dazzle of the midway and the sideshow tents. There was nothing morbid about that.

With every step, Fran felt like she was getting stronger. She barely even noticed how the baby was pressing on her bladder, or how much her ankles ached. Still, she had to admit a touch of relief when Juniper stopped her in front of a familiar trailer. The paint was different, and the dream catchers and stained glass stars in the window were new, but she knew the shape of it. She had lived inside those metal walls for years.

“It seems so small,” she said softly.

Juniper laughed. “Funny thing. When they told me Michigan was enough to keep you contained, I said the same thing about the state. You want to come inside and sit down for a little bit? Maybe let me read your cards?”

Fran paused. “That’s what this was all about, isn’t it? You wanted to read me.”
“That’s not what it’s all about. We really are here for the wedding. But yes, I’d like to do a reading. You left us rather abruptly. We worried. I want to be sure that you’re okay.”

Fran looked at Juniper--a woman who’d been her friend for as long as she could remember, even if they hadn’t seen each other in years--and sighed. Then she placed her hand in the other woman’s, and allowed herself to be helped up the stairs into the trailer.

“As much as you’re holding my hand today, you’d think I was marrying you,” she complained genially as she crossed the threshold. Looking frankly around, she added, “I love what you’ve done with the place. Real homey. If you kill people for fun.”

“A girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do to keep the unquiet dead from hassling her while she’s trying to sleep,” said Juniper matter-of-factly. “Sit down. I’m going to go get the cards.” Stepping lithely around the table which took up much of the front half of the trailer, she vanished into the back, leaving Fran alone.

Fran took another look at the walls, and snorted. “Not sure I could sleep in here if you paid me,” she muttered, and began the difficult task of maneuvering herself into a chair.

The trailer walls were plastered with words. Pages cut from newspapers, magazines, and even books were pasted up everywhere, layered with slices cut from carnival posters. No image was intact; no page was complete. There were at least four layers on the walls and ceiling, and that was just what Fran could see at an easy glance. Judging by the thickness of the seams where the layer of makeshift wallpaper met the doors or window, there might be as many as ten layers, all of them caked one over the other. Only the floor had been spared, although it was painted solid black.

“I have to freshen the paint every month,” said Juniper. Fran looked up, almost guiltily. Juniper smiled. “If I don’t, it scuffs, the wards open, and more dead people show up asking me to tell their futures.” She was holding an old wooden cigar box in her hands. “Do you come freely and without fear to hear your fortune?”

“Right now, my ankles say I couldn’t stand up if I wanted to, so sure,” said Fran. “You really sure this is necessary?”

“Yes,” said Juniper. She took the seat across from Fran, setting the box down to one side. She opened it and withdrew a deck of hand-painted cards, which she proceeded to shuffle. Finally, she extended the deck toward Fran. “Cut.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Fran cut the deck once, twice, three times, stacking the cards back together after each cut. Her hands were steady, although her heart was pounding. The trailer seemed too small; the walls were too strange.

Juniper’s skill with the cards was well-known to the members of the circus, and presumably, to the carnival that circus had become. What she saw, was. It was simple as that.

Watching Juniper as she laid the cards face-down on the table in a complicated cross, Fran wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

“The signifier,” said Juniper, and flipped over the first card.

The card--watercolor on poster board, pencil lines still showing through the wash of color--showed a woman in blue jeans and a flannel shirt sitting astride a palomino pony, her face turned toward the setting
“Out Where the West Begins,”’ she said, naming the card and the poem written around its border at the same time. “You carry the west with you. ‘Where there’s more of singing and less of sighing’...that’s you, sugar-pumpkin. It always has been, no matter where you were living.”

“That ain’t part of a normal fortune deck,” protested Fran weakly.

“Bibliomancy is a tricky thing. If you want to use it to read the cards, you have to make your own cards.” Juniper reached for the next card. “The present course.”

This card showed a woman in white, her belly large below the white drape of her gown, standing in the shadow of a hanging tree. “‘Sweet Margaret by the Hanging Tree,’” said Juniper. “There she waits, and every day she knows it’s a little less likely her love will come to her--”

“Now hold on one damn minute--” Fran began.

Juniper raised a hand. “Calm, now. This doesn’t mean he’s leaving you, or anything like that. You’ve got eyes, and so have I, and anyone can see that boy thinks the world of you. No, it just means you still have choices. You can walk away, if that’s what you decide.”

“I’m almost nine months pregnant, Juney, I don’t think I’d get very far,” said Fran mildly.

“You could come with us when we go,” said Juniper.

It felt like all the air left the trailer. Fran sat mute and staring as Juniper reached for the next card.

“The choice,” she said, and turned it over to show a crossroad in a snowy wood. “‘The Road Not Taken,’” she said. Then she looked to Fran, brows raised, waiting. “Two paths diverge in a snowy wood, my darling. Which one are you along? The one you know, or the one you don’t? You can’t have them both. We never can, in this life.” She chuckled a little, darkly. “Maybe that’s why the ghosts trouble me so much. They’re looking for a way to head on down that other road.”

“The one I don’t,” said Fran, finding her voice. “I’ve never been one for holding to the familiar.”

“No, you haven’t,” said Juniper, and flipped the card to the left of the snowy woods. “The choice once made,” she said.

This card showed a boat floating on a lake, with two people--one male, one female--riding inside. Their faces were concealed by an umbrella. Or a parasol, Fran supposed. It was always so hard to tell, with make-believe people.

“A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky,’” said Juniper, and read from the card, “‘Still she haunts me, phantomwise, Alice moving under skies.’ You’ll have your share of ghosts if you stay here. Some will be friendly, some won’t. Some might even make themselves at home. You’ll make a few, too, in your time.”

“That’s all right,” said Fran. “You can’t help making a ghost or two when you do what we do.”

“Ah, yes,” said Juniper, and flipped the next card. This one was a silhouette only, a woman with a shotgun in her hands reflected in black against a white wall. “‘Supposing,’” she said, and then read, “‘Supposing a haunt appeared to you, and a big black rooster up and crew? Well, supposing?’” She glanced at Fran, eyes canny and quick.
Fran met them without flinching. “We’d have chicken and dumplings for dinner.”

“Oh, Fran,” said Juniper, and laughed. “You’ll hunt monsters all your life; you’ll die with a gun in your hand, and you won’t have any time for regrets. I don’t know when or why that will happen. There’s too much tangled up around it. But that’s what waits for you here.”

Fran swallowed the lump that was trying to form in her throat, and shrugged. “Don’t care.”

Juniper turned the next card. It was a woman in a green dress. “Even if I told you that you were married in green?”

“Married in green, you’ll not long be seen,” recited Fran, without pause. “I’d say it doesn’t matter, Juney. I’ve seen things since I came here... shoot, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you, and you guard your bedroom against ghosts. I found a man worth lovin’, and he loves me back. I’ve got a baby on the way, and I can’t wait to find out what happens when you mix Johnny and me together. Shoot. Married in green? That’s the worst you can throw at me? That’s not going to be a problem. I always knew I couldn’t stay this lucky forever.”

Juniper paused in the act of reaching for the last card. Then she smiled and leaned across the table to put her hand on Fran’s shoulder. “You know, you’re right,” she said. “If that’s the worst the future has to offer you, you’re going to be one lucky bride, Frances Brown. I’m just as pleased as can be that I’m here to see it happen.”

“Me, too, Juney,” said Fran. “Me, too.”

“You want a glass of water?”

“I think...” Fran paused, choosing her words carefully before she said, “I think I’d rather walk back, if you don’t mind too much. It’s been a more exciting day than I had bargained for, and I’m supposed to be getting married in the morning. Besides.” She grinned suddenly, that bright circus poster smile that used to bring the townies in from miles around. “You haven’t met the mice yet. Let me tell you, Juney, they’re just about going to blow your mind.”

“Well, then,” said Juniper. “I guess I’ll walk you back to the house.”

Jonathan Healy was exactly where he had been for the past two hours: standing by the kitchen window with his hands folded tightly behind his back, watching the carnival folk mill around the back field, and waiting for his bride-to-be to make her way back.

“Relax, Johnny,” said his father, walking up beside him and clapping him heavily on the shoulder. “She’s fine out there. Those are her folks, and you did a good thing by bringing them here for her wedding.”

“Yes, I know,” said Jonathan distantly, eyes staying fixed on the window. “They’re the people who raised her. They know her better than anyone else in the world. If anyone could persuade her not to make a mistake, it’s them. Honestly, it’s a wonder she ever left them to begin with.”

Alexander Healy paused to give his son a sidelong look. “Johnny,” he said, “you don’t really know much about women, do you? Lord knows, your mother and I tried, but you never did take to the townsfolk. I always assumed you did some courting while you were off at college...”
“There wasn’t time,” said Jonathan. “I had studies to finish.”

“Ah. Well, then, as one man to another, can I give you some advice on the eve of your wedding day? Just friendly-like? Before your lovely fiancé snaps all your fingers off?”

Jonathan turned to blink at him. Finally, sounding dubious, he said, “All right…”

“Don’t assume she’s making a mistake. It insults you both. A woman like Fran knows what she wants, and if she didn’t want to marry you, she’d never have slept with you. Now, I won’t pretend having her pregnant without a ring on her finger hasn’t been a little hard to explain here in town, but that baby’s not a mistake, either. That’s your son or daughter, and my grandchild, and I can’t wait.”

“Ah.” Jonathan smiled and turned back to the window. “You know, this isn’t what I intended when I brought her back here.”

“I know. Your mother would have tanned your hide if she thought you’d gone shopping for a bride while you were in Arizona. Frannie had her own ideas about things. That’s what makes her so good for you. She’ll never stop challenging you to be better than you are.”

“Does Mother do that for you?”

Alexander nodded. “Every day of my life.”

Jonathan started to reply, and stopped as he saw Fran come walking slowly across the field, led by a black-haired woman who was clearly trying to conceal how much support she was offering to her pregnant friend. “Excuse me,” he said, and stepped away from the window, heading for the back door.

“Go right ahead, son,” said Alexander, and smiled as he watched Jonathan move outside to help Fran up the stairs.

It really was a good match. Assuming they could manage a wedding with no unexpected deaths, it would be a remarkable one.

Fran was all but glowing when Jonathan came outside to meet her. Her exhaustion was evident in the pinched lines around her eyes and mouth, but it didn’t seem to matter all that much; sheer joy was keeping her on her feet, and looked likely to do so for quite some time to come.

“You could have told me, you know,” she mock-scolded, as she took his hands and let him ease her up the shallow porch steps. “Surprises aren’t good for a lady in my delicate condition.”

“Take it up with Mother,” said Jonathan. “She’s one who approved of this entire lunatic plan, even down to the surprise at the root of it.” He looked over Fran’s shoulder to Juniper, who was looking on approvingly. “You must be Geneva Campbell. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“My friends call me Juniper,” she said, and followed Fran up the stairs. “Thank you for inviting us, and for hosting us on your land. It’s very charitable of you.”

“Not at all,” said Jonathan. “A carnival can’t help but improve our standing in this town, providing your lot doesn’t burn anything down or unleash any previously unseen monsters on the livestock.”
Juniper blinked before shooting Fran a sidelong look. "Is he for real?"

"Yeah, he is." Fran patted Jonathan’s arm fondly. "Not only does he talk like this all the time, but he does it because all that stuff has actually happened around us. Sometimes more than once. Turns out being a Healy brings a parcel of problems along for the ride."

A flicker of alarm crossed Jonathan’s face. Fran laughed.

"Problems I have willingly and intentionally taken on my own head," she said, and kissed his cheek. "Don’t make faces, you know I always see them. I’m takin’ Juney up to observe evening services. You need anything before I start dragging my carcass up the stairs?"

"Ah--evening services? Are you quite sure that’s a good--"

"She’s family," said Fran, fixing him with a look that told him, quite clearly, how futile it would be to argue. "Family doesn’t keep secrets, and Juney’s seen stranger than the congregation."

"Just please don’t climb all the way into the attic?" asked Jonathan, who knew when he was beaten.

"I wouldn’t dream of it," Fran assured him. "The mice are using my room this week, since I told them I couldn’t make the climb anymore, and they know how much I like to clap for their singing." She grabbed Juniper’s hand. "Come on, Juney," she said, and half-dragged the other woman into the house, leaving Jonathan staring bemusedly after them.

Alexander Healy stepped out onto the porch once the way was clear, patting his son on the shoulder again.

"Look at it this way, son," he said. "You never need to worry about whether or not she’ll be able to keep up with you."

"That’s true," said Jonathan. "The other way around, however, may be a problem."

Alexander laughed.

The mice were already assembled in Fran’s room when she arrived with Juniper in tow. They greeted the opening of the door with jubilations that might have been quiet from a single rodent, but were overwhelming from a horde.

"Now, hush," said Fran, smiling. "Me making it up the stairs isn’t that impressive." She put a hand on her stomach and winced as the baby delivered a particularly vigorous kick to what she was fairly sure had to be an organ she really needed. "Oof. All right, I take that back. Hello, the congregation. I’d like you to meet an old friend of mine."

"HAIL!" exulted the mice. "HAIL THE OLD FRIEND OF THE VIOLENT PRIESTESS!"

Juniper finally shook off enough of her shock to take hold of Fran’s elbow and tug repeatedly. "Frannie," she whispered. "There are mice on your bed."

"I know," said Fran. "I said they could come down. I’m mostly moved into Johnny’s room at this point anyways--me having a separate bed is just for show, especially with Junior here almost done baking--and I missed the evening services. So I told the mice to go ahead and use my room."
“You told the mice to use your room.”

“That’s what I just said, isn’t it?” Fran turned to the mice. “You lot, clear off the desk chair. I think Juney needs to sit down for a minute.”

“No, I’m fine.” Juniper shook her head, a little too vigorously, before squinting at the mice. “You have talking mice in your room. Not just mice. Talking mice.”

“Honey, did you really think I’d leave the circus to go someplace that didn’t have a sideshow?” Fran walked over to the bed, where she dropped herself heavily down onto the mattress. The mice moved out of the way with ease, a furry quilt that reformed itself around her once she was settled. “The mice are what caught my interest. Johnny was almost secondary.”

“Ah.” Juniper stepped gingerly into the room, squinting down at the mice on the floor. “That didn’t last?”

“Lord, no. Not once he pulled the stick out of his butt. Everybody, this is Juniper. She and I grew up together.”

“HAIL JUNIPER!” shouted the mice.

Juniper jumped. “Are they...always this enthusiastic?”

“Pretty much.” Fran turned to the mice nearest her. “What’s on the table tonight?”

“The Celebration of the Union Between the Patient Priestess and the God of Uncommon Sense,” said one of the mice, eliciting cheers from the others.

“Oh, good.” Fran looked toward Juniper, and translated, “They’re celebratin’ Johnny’s parents hooking up. You want to stay and watch?”

“So very badly,” said Juniper.

Fran smiled. “I love religion.”

The humans quieted, and listened as around them, the Aeslin mice began the recitation of another piece of the litany that was their life.

Morning found Fran asleep in her own bed, and the mice back upstairs in their attic home. Jonathan, meanwhile, was pacing in the kitchen, stealing occasional glances up at the ceiling, like he could will the rest of the household to wake.

The knock at the back door startled him enough that he actually jumped, one hand going to his vest. He stopped short of pulling a knife. Instead, he straightened, adjusted his glasses, and moved to let Juniper in. She was holding a brown jug, and smiling, a little warily.

“Good morning,” she said. “I’m sorry to bother, but I saw that someone was awake in here, and we could really use some clean water for breakfast...”

“It’s no trouble, really,” he said. “Please, come in. I’ll show you where the well is after we’ve all eaten.”
"Thank you." Juniper moved quickly past him to the sink. Jonathan noticed that her feet were bare, but decided not to say anything about it. She was, after all, a guest in his...well, field. Guests were permitted their unusual habits. Even the human ones. At least they didn’t hide in closets, or try to eat the silver.

Juniper glanced back at him while she filled her jug. “Frannie still sleeping?”

“Yes, thankfully.”

“She’s never been an early riser. I guess she still gets the crankies when she gets up too early?”

“Like she was a demon summoned from the very depths of Hell,” said Jonathan. He paled. “Wait--I didn’t mean--I’m not comparing my fiancé to a demon, truly I’m not.”

“Are you joshing me right now? Because believe me, comparing Fran to a demon would not be out of line, if she still sleeps armed.” Juniper looked back to the faucet as she turned the water off. “You’re a brave fellow to marry a woman with that many knives.”

“Honestly, I would be a foolish, ah, ‘fellow’ to marry any woman who didn’t have that many knives.”

Feeling obscurely like he was taking an exam, Jonathan straightened his glasses again, and said, “I believe Fran told you the circumstances of our first meeting?”

“She did,” said Juniper. “She was very clear about how she saved your life before she’d even known you for a full day.”

A small smile creased Jonathan’s lips. “Well, yes. That’s our Fran.”

“It is,” Juniper agreed. “She loves you.”

Jonathan blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. She wouldn’t still be here if she didn’t love you, and you wouldn’t have looked us up if you didn’t love her. We’re not a family in the traditional sense, but the carnival was the first family Fran ever knew. We give you our blessing.”

“I...ah. I don’t know what to say. Thank you so much. I...”

“You don’t need to say anything.” Juniper fixed him with a stern eye. “Just love her, all right? Take care of her as much as she lets you, and let her take care of you as much as you can, and love her, for however long the two of you have together. There’s nothing else that we could fairly ask of you, and there’s nothing we want more than we want her happiness. Can you do that? For us?”

“I can do it for her,” said Jonathan.

This time, Juniper smiled. “Right answer,” she said. “Welcome to the family.”

The feeling that this had all been some sort of unplanned-for exam lingered--but now it was tempered by the equally strong feeling that he’d somehow managed to pass. Feeling obscurely pleased with himself, Jonathan opened the pantry door and began the preparations for breakfast.

It wasn’t until the pancakes were almost ready that he realized he’d forgotten to worry about the day ahead. By then, there was really no point. The moment had passed.
Fran sat at the kitchen table, nursing a mug of coffee and trying not to think about what was going on outside. She was in her wedding dress, and Jonathan wasn’t meant to see her before she came out to become his lawfully wedded wife. Still, she wanted to know if the minister had actually shown up, and whether he’d been willing to stay once he got a look at the carnival—which was attracting townsfolk like honey attracted basilisks. Enid had been shooing them off since mid-morning, telling them to come back the next day when the midway would be open.

“Closed for a family function,” muttered Fran, and snorted. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Priestess?” It was a small voice, next to her shoe. Fran looked down to see one of the junior mouse priests sitting there, tail wrapped tight around his feet to keep it from being accidentally trod upon. “May I trouble you?”

“Why, sure,” she said. “I’m not doin’ anything until Mr. Healy comes to get me.” She’d have to start calling Alexander something other than “Mr. Healy.” One more adjustment in what was sure to be a lifetime. “What can I do for you?”

“We understand you are to be Wed today, becoming forevermore the Priestess of our beloved youngest God.”

“That’s right.” Mouse theology was pretty simple, once you got down to the bones of it. And that was just one more sentence she’d never thought she’d have the cause to put together.

“We wished to thank you.”

Fran blinked. She couldn’t really stoop to the mouse’s priest, but she leaned forward as much as she could, and said, “Come again?”

“We feared, once, that he would never find Love. That his Priestess would be forever denied him, because he did not journey. He did not seek. And when you came before us, he did not claim you.” The mouse twitched his whiskers. “He became joyful when you came. His joy has only increased in these last days. Gods bring the Heavens to us. Priestesses bring the Gods to Heaven. So we thank you. You have brought about the continuation of our faith.”

Fran sat back in her chair and blinked at the mouse, struck dumb. She was still sitting there, fumbling for something to say, when the back door swung open and Alexander Healy stepped inside.

“Frannie?” he said. “It’s time, if you’re ready for us.”

Frances Brown looked down at the mouse priest, with his eyes so bright and his whiskers pushed so eagerly forward. Then she smiled. “Oh, come on,” she said. In a flash, the mouse was up her leg and climbing up the outside of her skirt. He raced along the swell of her stomach to her chest, and finally vanished into her hair.

Alexander—who knew more about the ways of Aeslin mice than most, although not as much as his wife—smiled indulgently. “Good choice,” he said.

Fran took a deep breath and levered herself out of her chair. “I’m ready,” she said.

“I’m glad.” Alexander offered her his hand. She walked over and took it, and he bent to place a kiss atop her head. “I’m also glad you’re going to be my daughter. I couldn’t have asked for better.”
“Thank you,” Fran said. The room felt like it was suddenly too small, or maybe she was suddenly too big; there was no way it could contain her, and all the things that she was feeling. She clung to Alexander’s arm like an anchor, and step by careful step, he led her out of the kitchen, into the bright afternoon sunlight and down the stairs, to where the guests were waiting.

It wasn’t much of a wedding setup, in the traditional sense: the minister—who hadn’t run, despite Fran’s fears, and had instead been happily eating funnel cakes for the better part of an hour—stood on a fruit crate at the end of an aisle formed by folding chairs and rickety boxes. They had been arranged in the vaguest semblance of an audience, although half the guests sat on the ground, or stood, or perched on one another’s shoulders. Almost all of them were from the carnival. The guests from Jonathan’s side of the family—a few cryptozoologists, bounty hunters, and hedge witches—were gathered together, toward the front.

Fran froze when she saw the crowd. “I can’t do this,” she said. “Let’s go back to the kitchen. I can be a woman of loose virtue. I don’t mind.”

“Weren’t you the star of this show when Johnny found you?” asked Alexander, amused.

“That was a long time ago,” Fran said faintly. “At least nine months, for one thing.”

“Just shift your focus.” Alexander pointed to the end of the aisle. “Look.”

Fran looked.

Jonathan Healy could have been more nervous, he supposed; he could have been hyperventilating, or bleeding. Either of those would have made an already nerve-wracking moment even harder on him. He stood, in the suit that his father had been married in, tangling his fingers together until it felt like he might break something.

Something moved out of the corner of his eye. He turned toward it, and stopped, all thought of nerves forgotten, as he saw Fran hanging on his father’s arm, her hair gleaming golden in the sun.

She was wearing plain green cotton that Enid had helped her to sew, cut to allow her to stay comfortable despite the heat and her condition, while still hiding an assortment of knives beneath the bodice. A crown of braided green and white ribbons topped her head, and her hair hung loose around her face, and she had never been more beautiful.

The minister followed Jonathan’s gaze and smiled before motioning for the guests to stand. Someone pulled a lever, and the calliope groaned into life. Fran blinked, startled. Then she laughed.

“Not a wedding march, but this is better,” she said, taking her first step forward.

It was all easy from there.

Alexander beamed as he led her down the aisle, past the assembled guests. Some were smiling, some were crying, some, who had joined the carnival after Fran’s departure, simply looked politely confused. This was one of the stranger site fees they’d paid, but it was more affordable than most.

At the end of the aisle, Alexander kissed Fran’s head again before letting go of her arm. She smiled at him, and kept smiling as she turned to face Jonathan.
“Howdy,” she said.

“Howdy, yourself,” he echoed.

The minister cleared his throat. They both turned.

“Dearly beloved...” he began.

The ceremony suited the wedding, and the wedding party, perfectly: it was short, accompanied by the cheerful, slightly atonal tinkle of the calliope, and the minister’s fingers got stuck to his Bible twice, due to an excess of funnel cake. When it was over, Jonathan kissed Fran with the kind of enthusiasm that made it quite clear why she was already expecting, and she kissed him back just as firmly.

Enid had baked a wedding cake, of course--two, actually. One was placed outside, for the guests, and one carried up to the attic, for the mice. Some things transcend tradition.

It was a good day, and like all good days, the details didn’t matter as much as the picture when viewed from afar, like the memory of life’s one perfect summer. The bride was beautiful, for all that she was married in green, and the groom was besotted, and the baby had the good grace not to arrive while they were having their first dance.

It was a good day.

That night, Fran and Jonathan lay curled together in the bed that was finally theirs, not his, their wedding rings strange and new on their hands. Jonathan buried his face in her hair, breathing in the smell of flowers, fried sugar, and sunlight, and felt the last of the tension starting to leave his back. They had survived their wedding day. Whatever might be ahead of them, they would face it together, now and always.

“Johnny?” mumbled Fran sleepily.

“Yes, dear?” he asked.

“You still glad you went to Arizona?”

Jonathan paused, trying to imagine a lifetime where he’d done anything else. He had an excellent imagination. Shuddering, he pulled himself closer to his wife, and said, with all sincerity, “You have no idea.”

Fran laughed, and rolled over just long enough to kiss him. Then, finally, the two of them stopped talking and drifted off to sleep, soothed by the faint sound of squirrel-skull drums being pounded in the attic overhead.

Not every story can have a happy ending, especially not in the strange space where the known and the unknown are forced to forge alliances.

Leave this story be.