

Race to the Altar

by Trismegistus Shandy

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When George Howard Baker, the richest and most powerful mage in Georgia, died at the age of one hundred years and one day, his funeral was attended by his four surviving children, nineteen grandchildren, fifty-nine great-grandchildren, and seven great-great-grandchildren. And all of them, except a few of the youngest, who were getting cranky and needed their naps, attended the reading of the will afterward.

Their ancestor had been getting increasingly cantankerous and eccentric over his last twenty or thirty years, and no one (or at least none of his unmarried descendants who had visited him in the last few years and suffered one of his rants about young people being afraid of commitment) was surprised when the will contained a final piece of cantankerous eccentricity to screw over his descendants and set them at odds with one another. After a series of bequests to various charities and his household servants, he left the remainder of his estate — including his mansion in Sandy Springs and the many magical artifacts he had created or collected over the decades — to “whichever of my unmarried descendants with any trace of magical power is the first to marry someone with significant power (defined as capable of wielding a magical flux of at least one hundred thaums per square meter) and enter my house after the wedding.” His descendants had already discovered that no one could enter the house; those who had been at the house at the moment their ancestor died in the hospital had been instantly teleported onto the lawn. Now it became clear why.

As soon as the reading of the will was over, more than twenty of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren rushed out of the hotel ballroom the law firm had rented for the reading of the will, since the testator’s house was unavailable, and scattered to various private nooks to make urgent phone calls. One of these was Austin Baker, twenty-eight, an alumnus of Habersham Sorcerers’ College and actuary with an Atlanta-based insurance company. As soon as he had heard the conditions of the will, he had thought of his friend from college, whom he’d dated briefly in their junior year, Cheri Monroe.

“Hey, Austin, what’s up? Haven’t heard from you in a couple of months.”

“Well, my great-grandpa just died, and in his will...” He explained quickly, fully aware that his cousins were doing the same to various friends and acquaintances they thought they could talk into a marriage of convenience. “So I know it’s short notice, and it doesn’t have to last forever, just for at least a year, but will you marry me?”

“Damn, I’d love to get in on that Baker money and magic. But no. I’ve been dating this guy, Sam, and we’re getting pretty serious — I don’t want to mess up what we’ve got going by marrying someone else, even if it’s just a formality.”

“Okay. Yeah, I knew it was a long shot, and congratulations, I hope you and Sam work out. I guess one of my cousins will get the house and so on.”

“Don’t give up yet. Why don’t you ask Jordan? I just spoke with him a few days ago; he broke up with his girlfriend recently and isn’t dating anyone.” Austin, Jordan and Cheri had shared a house in their senior year; they’d stayed in touch since graduation.

“I mean... he’s hot, he’s a great guy, but I can’t marry him! He’s straight as a pin, and I’m male like 80% of

the time!”

“Well, you could change yourself into a woman for the wedding and change back after you claim the inheritance? If it even matters. Same-sex marriage is legal in all fifty-two states now, and if this is a marriage of convenience, it won’t matter that Jordan isn’t attracted to your usual form.”

“Yeah, but I bet my great-grandpa’s spell doesn’t take same-sex marriage into account. Anyway, I’d better call Jordan right away, see what he says. Let’s talk more later, okay?”

“Later. Good luck.”

Austin took a deep breath, centering himself and focusing on the flow of his magic. He wasn’t a powerful mage; though he’d taken a couple of transformation courses in college, he didn’t have the power required to transform anyone but himself. But he transformed himself often enough that it didn’t take him long to shift over to one of the female forms he’d used before.

Once she was female for the first time in months, she dialed Jordan and waited impatiently for him to pick up. It rang seven times and went to voicemail.

“Hey,” Austin said without preamble, “this is Austin. I’ve got a proposition for you...” As soon as she’d recorded the message, she hung up and immediately started texting Jordan the same information. After the third sequential text, Jordan called back.

One hasty explanation later, Jordan said, “That sounds like an amazing opportunity. Are you sure you’d be comfortable getting married as a woman, though? As far as I know you’ve never been female for more than a few days at a time.”

“For this, I can handle it. And it probably won’t matter once we’re married and we’ve claimed the house. So are you in?”

“Yeah, I’m in. Just give me a few minutes to cancel my afternoon appointments.”

“Can you teleport us to Vegas and back to Atlanta? If we have to fly both ways, I don’t think we’ve got much of a chance of being first.”

“Uh... ordinarily, yes, but I’m kind of low on magic right now? I burned like three crystals this week on big jobs for different clients. With what I’ve got left I could teleport myself, but I couldn’t take along a passenger.”

On days they didn’t work any major spells, mages could store their excess magic in crystals to save up for casting big spells later on.

“Could you teleport your clothes or would you have to teleport naked?”

“Oh, yeah, I could take my clothes. Basically anything that fits inside my aura.”

“Okay, I’ve got a plan. Meet me at my apartment. You remember it well enough to teleport there, right?” Jordan, who’d lived and worked in the Raleigh-Durham area for most of the time since graduation, doing magical consulting, had come to Atlanta for a visit just a few months earlier, not long after Austin moved into her current apartment in Norcross.

“Yep. See you in a few.”

Austin was already jogging toward the parking lot before she hung up. Her cousin Renee fell into step beside her as they approached the front doors of the hotel.

“You’re not gonna make it,” she said. “I just got off the phone with my fiance and the pastor who was going to marry us next month. He agreed to do it this afternoon under the circumstances.”

“We’ll see,” Austin said.

“Besides, I don’t think Great-Grandpa’s spell on the house will recognize a gay couple, even if one of them’s temporarily turned into a girl.”

“We’ll see,” Austin said. She didn’t have breath to remind Renee that she was bigender, and it would have been a queer wedding even if Cheri had agreed to marry him; she wasn’t in as good a shape as Renee. But if she wasn’t getting Renee mixed up with one of her other cousins (which was quite possible), she and her fiance lived down in Griffin, and driving there and back again through Atlanta traffic to meet their pastor for an emergency wedding could easily take longer than teleporting to Nevada, getting married, and teleporting back. But if Renee’s fiance could teleport...

Austin and Renee parted ways as they split off toward their separate cars. Austin drove a little over the speed limit, not fast enough to attract the attention of the cops, and got to her apartment in Norcross in less than twenty minutes.

Jordan was on the sofa, waiting for her. “I figured out what you’ve got planned while I was waiting,” he said. “You’re going to —” Even as he started speaking, Austin tossed her wallet to him and started transforming. “— change into something small...?”

Austin crawled out of her collapsed pile of clothes and scurried over to where Jordan was bending down to pick her up. He stood up, carefully tucked her into his shirt pocket and her wallet into one of his pants pockets and sang, “He said, ‘Miss Mousie, will you marry me,’ uh-huh,” as he gathered up her shirt and pants and held them close to his body. Then he cast a spell and the apartment around them vanished, replaced by — huh, another hotel lobby?

“This is the hotel I usually stay at when I’m in Reno,” Jordan explained as he power-walked toward the reception desk. “Excuse me, Donna, I’m in a hurry. I need a private space, just for a minute, for my fiancée to get dressed.” He plucked Austin out of his pocket. Apparently the hotel staff were used to dealing with eccentric mages, and this one seemed to know Jordan.

“Right this way, Mr. Dyson.” The reception clerk led them down a hall and unlocked a door with her keycard. Jordan set Austin’s clothes down on a chair and set her on top of them. She squeaked and gave the best approximation of a thumbs up she could manage with mouse paws. “I’ll be out in the hall,” Jordan said. “Hurry up.”

As soon as the door was closed, Austin transformed back into her human woman form and hurriedly got dressed. Jordan hadn’t brought her shoes, probably because they wouldn’t flatten enough to fit inside his aura. She stepped outside the room, where Jordan said, “Come on, there’s usually several taxis waiting just outside.”

“Why are we in Reno instead of Las Vegas?” she asked.

“Because I don’t have any teleport sites in Las Vegas memorized. But Reno has a few twenty-four hour wedding chapels too. I did a little research while I was waiting for you.”

“Cool.”

There were, in fact, two taxis waiting. They got into the one in front and Jordan promised the driver a fifty-dollar tip if they got to the county clerk’s office in five minutes or less. They did, though not without some

high-speed driving that had Austin gripping the door handle and the seat till her knuckles turned white. Austin was too nervous to speak, but Jordan gave the driver a brief summary of why they were in such a hurry to get married.

“Good luck,” their driver said as he parked in front of the main doors at the clerk’s office. “You want me to stay and keep the meter running?”

“Yes, please,” Austin said.

Once inside, they collected the forms they needed to fill out and got in line. Forced at last to slow down from their breakneck pace, Austin started having second thoughts. Work had kept her too busy to date since she broke up with Nathan almost a year ago, and he hadn’t liked it when she was a woman, so she hadn’t had sex as a woman in almost four years, since she was dating Brooke. Of course, there was no need to have sex with Jordan, this was just a formality to satisfy the conditions of the will, but now that she was filling out a marriage license application with him, she couldn’t help thinking about it. If he was cool with it, it would probably be really good sex; she’d been attracted to him ever since they met. And he’d dated a lot of girls over the years, so he had to have some experience.

The line moved reasonably quickly, and they were issued a marriage license just over half an hour later. While Austin was filling out paperwork, Jordan had booked an appointment online at the closest wedding chapel to the clerk’s office. It was still several minutes of downtown traffic away.

They ran out to the parking lot and jumped into their taxi. Jordan gave the driver the address of the wedding chapel they’d booked, and they were off.

Minutes later, they jumped out and ran up to the chapel door. The officiant on duty, a Janis Joplin cosplayer, listened to their breathless explanation of the wedding race and nodded curtly, rushing through the most abbreviated version of the marriage service.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” she said. “You can kiss the bride later, while you’re waiting for your plane —” But Austin was already shrinking out of her clothes, and Jordan was already bending over to pick her up. As soon as he had her in his shirt pocket and her wallet in his pants pocket, he pulled an energy crystal out of his other pants pocket and teleported back to her apartment.

“I’ll be in the living room,” he said, setting her down just inside her bedroom door. Austin grew back to woman-form and hurriedly got dressed. “Don’t take time for shoes,” Jordan called out. “We’ll go as soon as you’re decent.”

“Good plan.”

They dashed down the stairs and through the parking lot to Austin’s car, the hot pavement burning Austin’s bare feet. It was only a slightly longer drive to Great-Grandpa George’s house than to the hotel where the reading of the will had been held. Several of her relatives’ cars were parked in the driveway, but it seemed no one had broken through the barrier around the house yet; people were standing around talking, looking at the blue shimmering dome.

Austin parked as close as she could get, unbuckled her seat belt, and jumped out of the car. As she and Jordan got closer, she saw her mom among the crowd milling around near the door.

“Austin? Oh, or should I say Mrs. Jordan Dyson. Congratulations!”

“Hi, Mrs. Baker. Can’t stop to talk just yet,” Jordan huffed. As they got to the shimmering barrier, he took Austin’s hand and they tried to step through.

No dice. “That transphobic, homophobic asshole,” Austin muttered. “Oh, well. It was worth a try.”

“There’s still something we could try,” Jordan said diffidently. “What if it’s not letting us through because... ah... the marriage hasn’t been consummated?”

Just then, another car pulled up. Renee and her fiancé, Austin thought his name was Bill or Bob or something generic like that, got out and jogged toward the front door — only to be stopped by the barrier. As they stood there, looking bewildered, Austin was already dragging Jordan back toward her car.

“Back seat. Now,” she whispered.

“On it,” he whispered back, hurrying along with her. As Austin unlocked the back doors of her car and they got in, she said, “Are you sure about this? I know you agreed to marry me, but I didn’t expect —”

“It’s more than okay,” he said, climbing in and started to unbutton her shirt. “I’ve been into you ever since you first changed into a woman — an obvious womanly form, I should say — during our Transformation 301 class. But I was too immature to ask you out when we were only compatible about 20% of the time.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m making up for younger me’s mistakes.”

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Less than ten minutes later, sweaty and flushed but still unsatisfied, Austin and Jordan hopped out of the car and dashed toward the barrier. They paused on the threshold, then stepped forward again — and passed through. The blue barrier rapidly phased through several colors and vanished.

“Come on,” Renee complained, just a few steps behind them. Her bridegroom swore a blue streak.

Austin wasn’t paying attention; her mind was suddenly flooded with a sense of the whole house and grounds. She could feel where all her relatives were standing on the lawn, all the doors and windows, all the appliances, all the magical artifacts. “Whoa,” she said. “You feel that too?”

Jordan nodded. “Watch this.” The front door lock clicked and it swung open. “You want me to carry you over the threshold?”

“Sure, why not.” She shrank herself a little and he picked her up.

“Sorry, cuz,” Austin called out to Renee. “Come on in, everybody. My husband and I will be a bit busy for a while, but y’all are welcome to help yourself to refreshments in the kitchen while we... freshen up. Mom, could you make sure nobody helps themselves to anything *but* food?”

“Of course, sweetie. You two have fun.”

Renee muttered something unkind while the horde of relatives filed through the doors and went to raid the kitchen. Meanwhile, as soon as Jordan set Austin down, she tugged him by the sleeve and led him up the stairs to one of the bedrooms. Not her great-grandfather’s master bedroom, that would need some cleaning before they could move into it, but one of the guest rooms where the sheets were clean.

“We’ve got some unfinished business. Ten minutes in the back seat of a Civic is *not* enough to satisfy this blushing bride.”

By the time they came back downstairs, an hour and a half later, the kitchen was almost bare of food and drink, and five more disappointed couples had arrived along with various other relatives, already married, too young, or not inclined to marry. Austin's mom had organized an impromptu wedding reception for all the hastily married couples, including some who had flown to Las Vegas and wouldn't be back until later in the evening.

When they said goodbye to the last of their guests, two hours after midnight, Austin slumped against her husband's side and sleepily mumbled, "We've got so much stuff to do tomorrow."

"It can wait," he said. "Maybe even until the day after tomorrow."

"Did I wear you out?" Austin asked with a sly smile.

"You have plumb wore me out," Jordan said. "I couldn't cast a spell or get an erection right now if my life depended on it."

"Good thing all I need you to do right now is snuggle me, then."

They started toward the stairs, but looked up at them and decided against climbing them just then. They spent the night cuddled on the huge L-shaped sofa instead, covered by a quilt that was older than Great-Grandpa George.

They had a lot to talk about tomorrow. Whether Jordan would quit his job in Raleigh and move back to Atlanta, whether they wanted to stay married longer than the year and a day required by the will, whether Austin could stand to stay female for a whole year and whether Great-Grandpa George's spell would consider the marriage annulled if she didn't... But for now, snuggling with her best friend was enough.

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