

The Princess and The Handmaid

The Wedding

“I’m glad you could be here.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Celeste kept her hands in her lap as the handmaid attending her carefully pinned a flower in her hair. “Mother is insisting that we go to the country for a while after the wedding, but I am so happy she let us come to the palace first and Stefan was most kind when visiting us.”

Celeste may have recovered from her illness, yet her face was still pale and she looked thin. Adele did not blame her mother for wanting to take her somewhere else to recover fully.

“He wasn’t visiting *us*, Celeste, he was visiting *you*.” Rosella, Celeste’s sister, stood beside the window, her red hair already arranged. Her gown was almost identical to her twin’s, except Rosella’s was cobalt blue and Celeste’s was sky blue.

“That doesn’t matter,” Celeste said softly. “It was lovely to see him.”

“You’ll get to see him again, at the wedding!”

While the sisters talked to each other, Adele glanced towards where Olivia was sitting without disturbing Helene’s work on her hair. She had insisted that Olivia be one of her attendants for the wedding, and Queen Corinna was only too happy to agree.

Olivia herself was wearing a red velvet dress with gold trim. Two locks of hair were bound away from her face, and the rest hung long and loose. Helene had been determined that Olivia should wear flowers in her hair to match the others; eventually, Olivia had allowed her to place a couple of crimson roses in her tresses.

“All done, Your Highness!” Helene announced. Adele stood up as carefully as she could; she didn’t want to tread on the silk gown and tear it. It was impossible to walk in a dress like this – the only option was to glide. The dress itself was a deep golden colour, with roses embroidered around the neckline; the seamstress had insisted that the design be kept simple, as the intention was for people to look at Adele herself, not at her dress.

She looked at her hair in the mirror. It cascaded down her back and was decorated with tiny golden roses. “It’s beautiful, Helene. Thank you.”

King Tristan was correct in saying that Helene would recover fully from being poisoned. He had also confided in Adele his suspicions that the poison might had been meant for Helene all along, to get her out of the way while Alterne went after his true target.

“It was my pleasure as well as my duty, Your Highness.” Helene and the other handmaid curtsayed and quietly left the room.

Now that the bride and her attendants were fully prepared, all they could do now was wait. The minutes seemed to pass as slowly as days.

“Are you excited?” Rosella asked suddenly.

“Rosella.” Celeste’s tone was both gentle and reproachful. “You can’t speak to Her Highness like that.”

“It’s all right,” Adele said quickly. “We’re in private – and we’re going to be family in a few minutes.”

A few minutes.

Her hands fluttered. She was going to be married to Prince Stefan – and she *was* excited about it. But she could not let her excitement show in front of the gathering; she had to be the very picture of poise and serenity, which was expected of a princess on her wedding day.

The only cloud on her horizon was that her mother could not be here.

Someone knocked on the door. The eyes of all four young women were drawn to the messenger as he entered.”

“It’s time, Your Highness.”

In Evaria, royal weddings took place in the palace chapel, with only family and friends attending. The real celebrations took place at court, with feasting and dancing. When Adele's mother, Queen Eleanor, was married, parties were thrown throughout the kingdom and a holiday was proclaimed to honour the event.

As she stood outside the audience hall, Adele fought to keep her breathing steady. She thought she felt a gentle hand brush hers; the light touch helped to calm her nerves.

Then the trumpets sounded and the doors opened to reveal a room bathed in light. Adele barely saw the way it twinkled on the windows and chandeliers, or the people lining either side of the hall.

She only saw the figure in blue and gold standing at the other end.

As she glided towards him, Stefan kept his eyes on her. He was smiling. Adele couldn't help herself; she smiled at him in return as soon as she thought he could see it.

Then they were standing side by side in front of the preacher. His voice carried throughout the hall, but despite his solemn face Adele could see the kindness in his eyes.

"Do you, Prince Stefan of Askarr, take Princess Adeline of Evaria to be your wife, to share her heart and her joys, her sorrow and her tears, and to bind your life with hers for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," Stefan replied.

"Do you, Princess Adeline of Evaria, take Prince Stefan of Askarr to be your husband, to share his heart and his joys, his sorrow and his tears, and to bind your life with his for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do." Her voice was calm and quiet.

"Please join hands and face each other."

As she placed her hand in Stefan's, Adele was surprised to discover that it was perfectly steady. The preacher wound a white ribbon around their wrists, binding them together.

"By the power given to me, I declare this man and this woman to be husband and wife. You may seal your marriage with a kiss."

As soon as their lips touched, applause echoed everywhere in the hall. Stefan was blushing as deeply as Adele as they turned to face everyone.

Neither of them could stop beaming.