

“This whole wedding is a farce, I tell you.” Me and the other handmaiden silently continue dressing her, but I listen with a passive face. “Those old fools in the council don’t know what they’re doing.” She continues while we lace up her back. “Diplomacy is well and good, but what of our pride? We are marrying off the King of Saros like he’s some second daughter, all for a vague promise of security.” Lady Almandine is by far my favorite out of the nobles I’ve had to serve. She spills political information more often than a child spills tea, and I just have to stand here and remember things. Though, I do need to be cautious about how I’m responding. She enjoys conversation, or at least talking to herself, but she might grow suspicious if her lowly servants appear capable of keeping up with her. “And that princess from Froston – Eleanor – comes here, acting all polite and proper.” We start dressing her hair. She wants the single long braid, as usual. Someday she may realize she is the only woman in court who still wears it. “That girl knows she’s already won. I saw her, walking around ‘familiarizing herself with the castle’ as if she owns it.” We move on to her makeup. She somehow manages to keep talking. “It’d be one thing if we’d arranged this with his younger brother, or even before the old King had died, but- oh, we’re done? Right, let’s go.” I try not to appear frustrated. Lord Xarin said to pay extra close attention to word regarding the old King’s death, to see if anyone knows more information than what is public. I have been serving as one of his informants since I was twelve years old. He claims that I give better reports than most, though I imagine he tells that to everyone.

We all head out of her room and towards the audience hall, where the wedding is being held. For all of her complaining, Lady Almandine does a good job of pretending to enjoy this. After all, it would be highly improper to appear anything but joyous on the day of King Irwin’s first wedding. We are quite early into his reign, so all must appear to be well. I have been instructed to serve as a general serving girl for the wedding party. I suppose it must mean Lady Almandine is of lower standing than she acts, if she is being forced to “donate” one of her handmaidens. I think it is foolish, myself. We have many foreign guests, and not enough servants to handle them without hiring outside help. We are going to appear

incapable of affording servants on our own King's wedding. Hopefully our chefs will amaze the guests such that they do notice. I detach myself from Almandine's party so that we enter separately.

I have never seen this many people in one room. The feast is set up around three large mahogany tables, with most nobles already seated and talking to each other. No food yet. I can stand at attention and survey the room for a moment before heading to the kitchens. The thrones are empty... thrones? There is a second chair next to the King's throne... I can see now, many of our locals are eyeing it as well. Did the King make this choice himself, or did someone else press him to? A very bold statement, regardless. The foreigners look just as curious about it, so I don't think it's a tradition from Froston. I can see Lord Xarin and the other councilmen sitting on the head of the leftmost table, the side closer to the thrones. The old Leech seems to be fretting quite a bit over it while the Holy Voice tries to soothe him. Xarin doesn't look bothered by the thrones situation, but he does seem just slightly upset at the performance from the other councilmen. The Fool is out and about, entertaining the guests with parlor tricks. I see that he is refraining from his usual political commentary. I wonder if that's because of our guests, or if it's because the wrong people have noticed how smart he is? He notices me watching him, acts flustered, and gives me a very extravagant, low bow before losing his balance and falling onto his face. I depart to the kitchens before anyone else notices my presence.

The chefs have done a good job overall. The Saros food appears to be a selection of the King's favorites and some other popular delicacies. I am not familiar with Frostonian cuisine, but I heard a rumor that a chef was sent with the bride's party to instruct our chefs in the preparation of our new Queen's favorite meals. I can't say as to whether or not the food was cooked correctly, but it certainly appears appetizing. I stood around with the other servants, waiting for a cue to deliver the food. Until we start hearing the typical silence that occurs shortly before the King makes a speech, we can stand around and have some gossip of our own. One of the servants, a younger boy, makes a move to pluck a grape off of one of the platters. I swat his hand away, telling him that there will be more than enough

food for us to throw away when the festivities are over. I stop speaking and realize that the King has started making a speech of his own. We all get prepared to carry out the dishes at his cue. His public speaking isn't as good as the last King's, but he gets the themes of gratitude and celebration across. Eventually, I can hear the Voice giving the wedding rites, the cheering that signifies the kiss, and a call from the King to let the celebration commence.

We all march out like soldiers, setting out plates and filling wine glasses. I have the honor of serving the central table, so I start my marching towards the King and Queen's families first and foremost. I carefully lay out the Saros foods for the King's side, and the Froston foods for the Queen's side as expected. The Queen actually thanks me before she starts eating. Is that a custom from Froston, or is she just determined to make a good impression? Unfortunately, they were all only making idle chatter about the wedding in the time that I was there. I turn away start walking down the table with the rest of the food.

I hear a thud behind me.

I turn quickly, expecting to see the King dead. Instead, I see that the King is standing, but the Queen's face is submerged in her stew. King Irwin looks panicked for half a second before shouting at the top of his lungs over the panicked crowds, pointing at me.

"GUARDS!!!"

It sounds like a hundred metal hooves closing in from all around me. I look around, not knowing what I'm looking for. I see Lady Almandine's face, white as a sheet. Lord Xarin stares at the Queen with a grave expression. I can't see the Fool anywhere. An entire table of Frostonians look at me with both rage and grief.

"I-"

I feel a sudden, hard pain against the back of my head and fall into darkness.

Author's Note: I intend this as a scene from somewhere in the middle of a larger novel. I added a little more exposition text than I might have otherwise, but even with that I imagine some things in the full story would be less vague than they are here. Political intrigue is my favorite genre to read, but it was challenging actually writing it in that I had to straddle the line between not copying my favorites and also not going so far out of my way to subvert them that I end up writing something uninteresting.