

Dressing Up

A Frog Prince Short Story by K. M. Shea

“Are you really certain this is necessary?” Ariane tugged on her linen underclothes, attempting to make them cover as much skin as possible.

“It is,” Heloise, Severin’s housekeeper, said with a surprising amount of vehemence. “Your wardrobe is nonexistent. You need a slew of dresses.” She gave Ariane a curt nod as she snapped her fingers at a parade of maids who were carrying an *alarming* amount of cloth into the room.

“Heloise is correct.” Bernadine—the head cook—said. (Ariane didn’t really understand why a cook had a vote in her wardrobe, and when she voiced this thought, she was promptly ignored.) “You will soon be a princess—even now you should consider yourself genteel! You cannot wear your maid uniform any longer.”

“I have not worn my uniform since the Summit,” Ariane protested.

Heloise eyed her and even Elle—seated beyond her servants in an armchair—raised her eyebrows.

“Not often, at least,” Ariane amended. “And I still have the dresses Elle gave me for the Summit.”

“Pish-posh,” Heloise snorted. “Those were made for Her Highness—not you. The colors and styles are all wrong for you.”

“Indeed,” Emele said. “As the intended of Prince Lucien—who defines men’s fashion among nobility—you must mind your wardrobe and match his level of finesse.”

Ariane squinted at the ring of servants that nearly surrounded her. (Bernadine aside, she also didn’t understand what Elle’s lady’s maid and the housekeeper had to do with her wardrobe either.) Hoping for an ally, Ariane looked to Elle.

The dark-haired princess stroked her cat that purred on her lap and leaned over to pet the fat papillon dog that sat on her feet with his tongue hanging out. “Sorry, Ariane. I’m just glad they’re bothering someone else besides me.”

“Now, chin up,” Heloise ordered. “Madame Beaumont will soon arrive.”

“Madame Beaumont?” Ariane pushed her long and loose hair over her shoulder, then knitted her hands together so she wouldn’t be tempted to braid her hair in the spare moment.

“Severin’s seamstress,” Elle said.

Emele tut-tutted and rearranged Ariane’s long, brown hair so it again spilled over her shoulder. “The term is *modiste*, Your Highness. She is a dressmaker.”

Elle rolled her eyes but smiled when her cat placed a black paw on her chin. “Well, she designs Severin’s clothes, too, and I’ve never seen *him* in a dress.”

Ariane snorted, but Emele frowned, and Heloise raised her eyes to the ceiling in a look of long suffering.

Bernadine magnanimously ignored the princess. “You’ll enjoy this, Mademoiselle Ariane. It will be *fun!*” She patted Ariane’s hands, and her plump cheeks dimpled when she gave her a grandmotherly smile.

The door banged open, and in marched a buxom woman with stark red lips who moved with an impressive amount of agility. She trundled across the room, stopping next to Heloise and Bernadine to study Ariane with a critical eye. “This is she, the future bride of His glorious and fashionable Highness, the girl destined to be our queen?”

Emele nodded. “She is!”

Elle laughed when her cat licked the tip of her nose. “Ariane, this is Madame Beaumont. Madame Beaumont, Ariane.”

Madame Beaumont circled Ariane with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. She stopped after making a complete circuit.

Why do I feel as though all my physical flaws are being combed over? Ariane nervously cleared her throat and again glanced at Elle. The princess winked at her, allaying some of her fears, but Ariane still fought to forcefully keep her chin up and shoulders rolled back.

Suddenly, Madame Beaumont’s expression cleared. “She is beautiful! A diamond in the rough! Those eyes, the gloss of her hair—such loveliness we can work with. *She* is not one who will ever ruin my wonderous creations by climbing a tree.”

“That was *one* time,” Elle complained.

Madame Beaumont inspected Ariane’s skin, then peered into her eyes. “Such a glorious shade—both green and brown! The colors we will be able to put upon you, Mademoiselle, they shall make you sparkle! Now, we begin!”

She stepped back, and a maid—holding a bolt of light pink silk—scurried forward and held the cloth beneath Ariane’s chin.

Madame Beaumont placed a hand on her hefty chest. “Horrible! No pinks—they are wrong for the brown in her eyes and her fair complexion!”

Heloise snapped her head in a nod. “Indeed. You’ll have to be careful with blues as well.”

“You, next!” Madame Beaumont gestured imperiously at the next maid.

Marcelle smiled at Ariane as she approached her with a bolt of lavender silk.

“Much better!” Madame Beaumont declared. “You, off to the side. Next!”

Maids holding bolts of bright red, sunshine yellow, and light blue were rejected, but a charcoal gray brocade, a forest green silk, burgundy velvet, and bolts of cobalt blue and royal purple linen were approved.

The experience was more fun than Ariane had expected—as long as the ladies stayed far away from white fabrics, that was. (White gowns were a nightmare to keep clean and as a result could often only be worn a few times. Ariane was *not* going to foster such foolishness!)

“She will need several formal gowns,” Madame Beaumont said.

“I wouldn’t get too fixated on those,” Elle advised. “Her Majesty Queen Nicole will surely wish to be involved for those particular selections.”

“She shall need several tea dresses and gowns for daywear. Silks mostly—the charcoal gray brocade is too dark for summer,” Heloise declared.

Bernadine placed a hand on her plump cheek. “But she looked so pretty in it!”

“She needs more petticoats,” Emele said.

“No,” Madame Beaumont declared. “She has not the liquid grace of Her Highness, but she still moves too prettily to hobble in such a way.”

Ariane cleared her throat. “Do you think I could maybe have lace on one of my day dresses?” she asked hesitantly.

The four ladies all turned to stare at Ariane for several long moments.

Ariane held in a fidget. *Did I say something wrong, or did I ask for too much?*

Heloise sharply turned around. “You heard her! Lace samples, now!” She barked.

Madame Beaumont flicked an imaginary tear from her eye. “It is so touching to see a future princess taking an interest in her clothes!”

Bernadine beamed and once again patted Ariane's hand. "You'll have plenty of lace to choose from, Mademoiselle."

"Indeed!" Emele said with a laugh that sounded like a lark's song.

Behind the ladies, Elle rolled her eyes.

"We must give you some accessories." Emele walked across the room with such grace she seemed almost to dance. She conferred briefly with some of the maids before she rejoined the ladies clustered around Ariane, bearing a fan made of lace and a silk parasol. "Here," she said, pushing the lace fan into Ariane's hands.

"Thank you." Ariane took the fan and opened it up. It was made of beautiful, intricate lace and white bone, and seemed fairly useless as an actual fan due to the delicate cloth. "...Am I supposed to do something with it?"

"No, it's ornamental," Elle stretched in her chair and yawned. "They enjoy randomly pushing useless things into your hands."

"It is not useless; it is a weapon," Emele declared.

Ariane peered doubtfully at the fan. "In what way?" She could see how her dresses and gowns could be effective mental weapons, but what good could a fan do? *I don't think it would hold up well if I tried to jab someone in the throat, and I doubt it makes a good tool of intimidation.*

"You shall understand when you need to use it," Madame Beaumont said confidently.

"If you say so," Ariane said skeptically.

Elle set her cat down and abandoned her armchair, joining Ariane as Heloise scolded the maids carrying lace. "You seem to be enjoying yourself." Elle offered her a smile. "I'm glad."

"I've never been able to call such lovely colors and fabrics my own," Ariane said.

"Though I worry how much this will cost."

Elle laughed outright.

Emele pursed her lips. "It seems we shall have a thrifty pair of princesses."

Ariane blinked and looked back and forth from Elle to Emele. "I beg your pardon?"

"It's merely that I also worried about the cost when Severin first told Heloise and Bernadine to have at me." Elle slipped a sisterly arm around Ariane's shoulders and squeezed her in a friendly manner. "It is a compliment—though Emele will never admit it."

Emele pointedly looked away.

“I am glad you are enjoying this, Mademoiselle Ariane,” Bernadine said.

“Indeed,” Heloise declared in her husky voice. “I imagine there are going to be many parts—and many people—that you won’t enjoy when you *do* marry His Highness and are crowned a princess. It is important to find joy in things such as this.”

“It feels rather materialistic of me,” Ariane admitted.

“Nonsense,” Elle said.

“But you have made it rather clear that *you* don’t enjoy getting new gowns,” Ariane countered.

“Yes, but you have no idea how much Severin spends on my horses, ponies, dogs, and Esses,” Elle said. “And then there are my weapons.... I also enjoy the positives of marrying a prince—just in a far different way.” Elle squeezed her shoulders again before she stepped back and smiled. “Heloise is right, Ariane. It’s perfectly fine to find joy in your new role—it’s *healthy* actually. Some days, it might be the only thing that keeps you from going mad!”

“All must find beauty in their life,” Madame Beaumont declared. “For Prince Severin, it is in his gardens; for Her Highness, it is in running in high places like a hoyden and ripping my beautiful gowns. You must find your beauty, or else you will forget what you fight for.” The buxom woman lifted both of her eyebrows and, with a gentle hand, tipped Ariane’s chin up. “For you *will* fight for it, Mademoiselle. Whether it be in the shadows, like Her Highness, or in the glittering splendor of a ballroom. You will now wield power, and you must keep the light on inside of you, even when others wish to snuff it out.”

Ariane wanted to argue. For how could they think *she* would make a difference? She was just a maid! *A maid who calls the Crown Prince of Loire her love....* Perhaps Madame Beaumont was right. As little as she liked to admit it, Ariane’s actions would have a greater effect from now on.

“I see,” she said rather slowly.

Bernadine chuckled and patted her cheek. “You are a good girl,” she praised.

“She is,” Elle agreed. “Now are you all done making her parade around in her underclothes, or do you have even more fabrics to test?”

Madame Beaumont and Emele exchanged sly glances.

“Actually,” Emele said. “We were rather thinking *you* needed a few new gowns to brighten your summer wardrobe, Your Highness.”

Elle swung around, but several maids wearing sweet smiles stood at her back, blocking her exit. “Drat.” Elle scowled. “Jock, Esses, you must run and get help!” she called to her overweight dog and black cat.

Esses sat on the armchair and began cleaning the fur between the toes of his back-left foot. Jock—the dog, presumably—panted happily and let his tongue roll out of his mouth before he rolled onto his back.

“Don’t worry, Your Greatness,” Heloise snorted. “This won’t take long.”

“*Nooooo!*”

Ariane grinned and glanced around as Elle’s servants mercilessly shucked her out of her dress.

This is very different from the life I once lived—it’s very different from the future I envisioned. I would always choose Lucien no matter the circumstances...but I’m happy I can have moments like these, and I’m happy I can call these ladies my friends.

“Ariane, help me,” Elle begged. “Please use your unusual defense skills and beat them off with a parasol.”

Ariane tilted her head and studied Elle with narrowed eyes. “Do you think we could have dresses that complement each other?” she asked.

“A fine idea!” Emele excitedly clapped her hands and squealed.

“With the right fabrics and embroidery, you could make a pretty picture standing side-by-side,” Heloise said.

“Ariane, I thought we were friends,” Elle said with exaggerated horror.

Ariane smiled shyly, but the expression bloomed into a full grin when the ladies laughed, and Elle joined in.

Yes...I think I will always remember the beauty of this day.

The End