

An Alliance

By K.M. Shea

“Erlauf is much smaller compared to Loire, but they remain an important ally in our crusade against these plagues of darkness. They have an absolute monarchy with a well disciplined army. Although they recently have taken over Trieux, the eldest Prince has married a Trieux duchess, which has apparently helped to bridge the gap of dislike between the countries. Their main difficulty now is goblins. Elle, are you listening?”

“Of course,” Elle said. “Goblins, Erlauf, big army.”

Severin frowned at his wife.

“What do you expect me to say? ‘The portrait of Queen Freja that hangs in the main hall of the palace at Werra is beautiful’?”

“We haven’t made a diplomatic visit to Erlauf’s capital. How do you know about the portrait?” Severin asked with narrowed eyes.

“I was there for a Ranger assignment once. It’s nice. Lucien would be gratified to know it’s not nearly as gaudy and luxurious as your family’s palace,” Elle said.

Severin pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why. Why did I think it was an intelligent idea to host the future Erlauf Queen and her consort mere *weeks* before she is crowned, when I have a wife with the eyes of a merchant?”

“I could always ask if they got rid of that eyesore of a throne in Trieux,” Elle said.

“Are you determined to dislike them, and to make them dislike you?” Severin said.

“Well...they are royals.”

“*We* happen to be royals as well,” Severin reminded his wife.

“But not like them,” Elle said, shaking her head. “Trieux was snooty and uppity before the take-over, and Erlauf strikes me as a bunch of stiff military types.”

“You *married* a stiff, military type, my *love*,” Severin growled. “And you are now considered the trend setter for female garbs in Loire.”

Elle looked at Severin with a smile that was too wide for polite society to consider it beautiful. “You see, you do have some of the cat beast left in you. If you tried hissing it would further the image.”

“*Elle!*”

“Don’t worry, I will play nice,” Elle said, touching her hair to make certain all of her dark tresses were still pinned up. “If only because I don’t want to waste all the effort Emele went through to make me look presentable.”

“I thought Princess Cinderella made a good impression on you when we attended her wedding?” Severin asked, shuffling his papers.

“She did. I liked that her servants were so loyal to her. But it occurred to me later it could have been all for show,” Elle said, her expression thoughtful. “So now I am undecided. I feel that today will be revealing.”

Severin finished with his papers and stopped beside his wife to kiss her on the lips.

“What’s this, no lectures to behave myself?” Elle playfully said, pulling back from the kiss.

“I have learned to keep out of your schemes and plans. But I will be interested to learn what you think of them,” Severin said, sliding his arms around Elle’s shoulders.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Severin said, reluctantly releasing Elle, who smiled mischievously at him.

“Your Highness,” Burke said, sweeping into the room with the pomp of a peacock. “Prince Cristoph and his wife Princess Cinderella have arrived. They have already been taken to their rooms so they may freshen up”

“They are early,” Severin blinked.

“Yes,” Burke agreed.

“I planned to speak to them in the dining hall, but that is not possible now. It cannot be ready,” Severin said, pausing by his desk to drum his fingers on the top.

“That is correct,” Burke agreed.

“Which of the salons have recently been aired out?” Severin asked.

“The Gold Salon,” Burke said.

Elle shook her head. “That will be too pompous for Erlauf. The Princess may appreciate it, but Erlauf is much more subdued in terms of décor. The library, perhaps?”

“It’s not very welcoming,” Severin said. “It’s a shame it is so late in fall, or the gardens would be a viable option.”

“Then let’s use my private salon,” Elle said. “It is tasteful and clean.”

“Are you certain?” Severin asked.

“For the amount of money you paid to have it redecorated for me I should *hope* so.”

“That is not what I meant. Are you certain you want to open it up to political talks? I know it is something of a haven for you,” Severin said, brushing Elle’s cheek with the back of his hand.

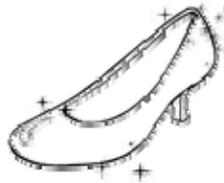
Elle smiled widely. “Only when I’m trying to escape nobles. I must admit I am reluctant, but we are badly pressed, and it will give the meeting an intimate feeling that may aid our cause.”

“Thank you,” Severin said.

“Of course.”

Severin turned to Burke. “We will use Elle’s salon. Please see that the prince and princess are escorted there, and send for refreshments.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Burke said, winking at Elle before he swept from the room.



“Their Highnesses will see you in Princess Elle’s personal salon. This way, please,” a manservant said. He elaborately bowed and led the way through the breath-taking Chanceux Chateau.

Cinderella worked hard to keep her gaze fixed on the path in front of her, when what she really wanted to do was gawk like a yokel.

Chanceux was *beautiful*. It was beautiful in a sedate, understated way. Every item and decoration was of highest quality, but was stately and elegant. It glimmered with splendor—unlike the subdued, more bare style of Erlauf architecture—but was not gaudy or ridiculous—like the Trieux palace used to be.

What else could I expect of Loire—the mother of Trieux fashion, art, and culture? Cinderella thought in awe.

When the servant opened the door to the salon, Cinderella was further impressed.

The salon was sunny—thanks to three sets of windows that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. The lower walls were beautifully carved wood paneling that stretched into plaster that was painted a soft green color. The ceiling was vaulted and displayed an amusing mural of a chubby pony and a flat, fluffy dog that chased a black cat around the perimeter of the room. Giant gold mirrors nearly as large as the windows were posted on either end of the salon, increasing the light in the room.

Framed portraits with gold gilding hung from the walls. The most remarkable portrait—of a black haired woman standing with a black haired man—hung above a marble fireplace. The fireplace was lit and radiated heat with crackling logs.

“Please, be seated. Their Highnesses will arrive shortly,” the manservant said. He bowed before he left the salon, closing the doors behind him.

Friedrich—who had Cinderella’s arm tucked in one arm, and held a basket with his free hand—squeezed her arm and smiled at her. “Are you alright?”

Cinderella nodded. “I’m a little intimidated, and I don’t think they *mean* for us to be intimidated, which makes it worse.”

“This chateau is certainly like nothing I’ve ever seen,” Friedrich agreed, his eyes roaming the walls. “But you do Erlauf proud,” he said, his eyes straying back to Cinderella, lingering on her carefully prepared dress and hair.

“I must try. It would not do well to have the prince and princess look ill upon us,” Cinderella said.

“You need not be ashamed,” Friedrich smiled tenderly, gently pushing Cinderella’s fringe of bangs from her forehead. “You are soon to be a queen. The prince and princess will very likely remain a prince and princess.”

“Yes, of a country many times larger and richer of ours,” Cinderella said. “Besides, everyone knows Prince Severin runs the military and Princess Elle has become the idol of the Loire court. Don’t be fooled by the titles. Even if I am to become an absolute monarch, the prince and princess will have a bigger impact on the continent than us. That is why *we* are answering their summons, and not the other way around.”

Cinderella was especially anxious to make a good impression on Princess Elle. It was known through the entire continent that she was responsible for mending the relationship of the Loire King and Prince Severin. She was said to be dazzlingly clever, intelligent, and universally liked in spite of her merchant blood.

If Princess Elle approved of Cinderella, the courts of Loire would as well. Politically speaking Erlauf would never last against an assault from Loire—physical or economic. She *had* to win them over, or at least refrain from being disliked.

“Perhaps,” Friedrich agreed. He gave Cinderella a breezy smile as he walked her to a settee.

“Your cool exterior does not dupe me, Fred,” Cinderella wryly said.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Friedrich said, as innocent as a summer sky. Cinderella rolled her eyes.

Friedrich was just as anxious as she was—although for entirely different reasons. Rather than worrying over Erlauf, the debonair colonel looked forward to the meeting like a young girl awaits her first ball. Prince Severin was someone he looked up to as the illegitimate prince had taken command over the entire Loire army at a young age, and had greatly improved it.

After they first received the summons—or the carefully phrased invitation that asked Cinderella and Friedrich to wait upon Prince Severin and Princess Elle at their home, Chauceux

Chateau—and Cinderella observed Friedrich’s joy, she asked if Severin’s accomplishments were really that impressive.

“*Erlauf has one of the best armies in the continent. Why is Prince Severin so special?*” she had asked.

“*Erlauf is one of the best, but Loire has become THE best,*” Friedrich explained. “*Mostly because of its sheer size and the money Loire can throw at it, but also because of the impressive way Prince Severin manages it. Even though it is a cumbersome size, he has armed it and broken it apart so it reacts quickly. It’s well informed, almost frightfully so, and the communication among the different armies is second to none. He is a master tactician.*”

“Are you ready to meet this master tactician of yours?” Cinderella asked.

“And the lass who tamed him?” Friedrich added. “They did attend our wedding.”

“Yes, and we spoke to them for all of three minutes during their entire visit,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich sighed. “I blame it on you. If you had not been so bewitching I would have seen to more of our guests.”

Before Cinderella could reply, a servant opened the door.

“His Highness Prince Severin, Commanding General of the Loire army, and Her Highness Princess Elle,” the servant said before stepping aside for the Loire Prince and Princess to enter arm in arm.

Neither Severin nor Elle were what Cinderella expected.

Princess Elle was pretty with sparkling green eyes that reminded Cinderella of summer, and shiny, ink black hair that was beautifully styled. Her dress was gorgeous and tasteful, as was the gold necklace she wore. She was quite handsome...but...imperfect. Her smile was too big, too crooked, and too mischievous to be beautiful. Her lips were full, but her nose was long. However... it seemed the Loire Princess’s imperfections made her even more her captivating than ordinary beauty would.

Prince Severin, on the other hand, was awe-inspiringly tall and broad shouldered. He had charcoal black hair that was pulled into a neat ponytail at the base of his skull, and unusual, amber colored eyes. His facial features were chiseled and strong, accenting his powerful physique. Cinderella had been expected a pinched-face noble, or perhaps a stick-like scholar. Instead, Prince Severin was surprisingly handsome and built like a soldier.

“Crown Prince Cristoph, Princess Cinderella, I apologize for the wait,” Princess Elle said with her wide, enchanting smile.

“Not at all, it is our pleasure to meet you, again,” Cinderella said, giving Princess Elle her best smile.

“Indeed,” Friedrich said, tilting forward in a shallow bow. “Thank you for inviting us. And please, call me Friedrich.”

Princess Elle and Prince Severin exchanged glances, which seemed to be some sort of signal between them.

“Please sit,” Prince Severin said. “Refreshments will be brought here shortly.”

“Thank you,” Cinderella said, sitting down. She looked to Friedrich, who raised the basket when the Loire Prince and Princess were seated.

“We brought small tokens of our esteem in you,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich opened his basket and removed a small tray that was filled with neatly labeled and arranged brown packets. He passed it to Prince Severin, who tilted his head—like a curious cat—as he read the labels.

“Flower seeds,” Prince Severin said, looking up and fixing his amber eyes on Cinderella and Friedrich.

Cinderella kept a pleasant smile on her lips. “We heard you have an appreciation for botany.”

“I do,” Prince Severin agreed.

“Winter roses and crocus flowers?” Princess Elle asked, leaning against her husband to read the seed packets. “My, you did well. I’ve never heard of Winter Roses.”

“In Loire’s climate both the crocuses and the winter roses will not bloom until the last month or so of winter—when it is closer to spring,” Cinderella said.

“You know something about flowers?” Prince Severin asked.

“Only certain kinds. My Duchy—Aveyron—grows flowers. A portion of those seeds were harvested from Aveyron,” Cinderella said.

“You grow flowers?” Prince Severin asked, seemingly intrigued by the idea.

“It is a booming market in Erlauf,” Cinderella said.

“We also have brought a gift for you, Princess Elle,” Friedrich said. He held the basket for Cinderella, who reached inside and picked up a black kitten.

Princess Elle stared at the cat.

“It’s an Erlauf Forest Cat,” Cinderella said, hesitatingly when the princess did not reach to take it. “It will grow to be bigger than a domestic cat—but not quite the size of a lynx.”

Princess Elle remained silent.

Prince Severin looked away, almost in disgust.

Their reactions made Cinderella and Friedrich worriedly look at each other. They had been told Princess Elle adored cats—especially black cats. Were their sources mistaken?

Cinderella and Friedrich jumped when Princess Elle suddenly leaned forward and took the kitten. As the small animal mewed and looked up at her, the Loire Princess’s lips twitched.

It took Cinderella a moment to realize Princess Elle was *fighting* a grin.

At last Princess Elle burst into a rich laugh that brightened the entire room. “I can’t help it, Severin. I like them already.”

“You are easily bribed,” Prince Severin said, his voice steeped in disapproval.

“They got me a *cat*. What do you expect me to do?” Princess Elle asked, lovingly petting her new kitten. The small kitten tried purring and nearly fell over in its efforts, pulling another laugh from the princess. “Should I name him Severin?” she asked teasingly.

Cinderella’s eyes widened, but Prince Severin merely snorted.

“We thank you for the gifts,” the Loire commanding general said. “It was thoughtful of you.”

“Of course. Thank you for the invitation to visit you,” Friedrich said.

“Yes,” Prince Severin said. He was silent for a moment, observing his wife before he started, his words slow and careful, as if he weighed every one of them. “We invited you here for a specific purpose. We wished to talk to you about the state of the continent.”

“What of it?” Friedrich asked.

“The upheaval it is in,” Prince Severin said. “Four or five years ago, sightings of black magic practitioners were rare. Goblins were only an occasional pest, and beasts like trolls and sea serpents had small domains and were sighted perhaps once every few years. Sadly, that lifestyle is no more.”

“We agree,” Cinderella said. “But what can we do about it.”

“We combine efforts, and prepare for a war,” Prince Severin said.

“A war?” Friedrich asked.

“We know of the attempts against Queen Freja’s life—and of the attack on Princess Cinderella shortly before you were engaged,” Princess Elle said, drawing all eyes to her.

The princess was breaking most social niceties by lounging on the settee. Her body looked languid and relaxed, but Cinderella could see there was something *else* in the princess’s eyes. Anyone who judged Princess Elle only as the idol of Loire Courts—however unusual her manners were in a country that prized elegance and perfection—would miss the guarded intelligence in her eyes.

“We are willing to admit Loire royalty has been under attack as well,” Severin dryly added. “My time as a beast was hardly unnoticeable.”

“Royalty in almost every country have been threatened. It is obvious that whatever is responsible for the increased attacks and sightings is organized and is attempting to debilitate country governments,” Princess Elle said.

“We cannot ignore it any longer. If we do, even countries who have mostly escaped—like Loire—will fall prey to whatever is masterminding this,” Severin said.

“What do you propose we do?” Friedrich asked, his tone guarded. “Do you want the use of Erlauf troops or land?”

“No,” Prince Severin said, surprising Cinderella and Friedrich. “We wish for a collaboration. Not only with Erlauf, but with as many countries are willing.”

“This enemy cannot be defeated by one or two countries,” Princess Elle said. “But if the majority of countries work together in an alliance, we can turn it back.”

“Who else were you thinking of?” Cinderella asked.

“Arcainia and Farsset to begin with. Ringsted would be one of our first choices, should the hurricanes and tropical storms clear up long enough to send a messenger without a weather mage. Sole, obviously, is not an option right now with the central government sleeping along with its princess,” Prince Severin said.

“As this would be a collaboration—an alliance—we would not expect the same things from every country,” Princess Elle said. “Instead, each country would be asked to give their greatest resources. Loire is in a position to offer troops and intelligence. Farsset is renown for its magical woods and bowmen. It could send archers and some of their crafted bows.”

“What would you have us give?” Friedrich asked. His voice was casual, but Cinderella could feel the weight of his words.

“We hoped you would send troops to the western countries,” Prince Severin said. “We can send troops to aid your goblin infestation, and send aid to the Eastern countries who need it, but I am not comfortable with sending my troops past Erlauf.”

“I understand. You would like to keep them only one country away from Loire,” Friedrich guessed.

Prince Severin nodded.

“The Loire King is aware of this plan?” Cinderella asked.

Princess Elle nodded. “This... plague has been much discussed among Severin’s family. It was his father who suggested we head the efforts to unite the countries in an alliance. He gave his blessing to do what must be done to form this collaboration.”

“Only because you’re his pet,” Severin muttered.

To Cinderella’s surprise, Princess Elle patted her husband’s shoulder. “You’re so cute when you’re jealous. Like a ca—”

“Our government is aware of this venture and supports it,” Prince Severin repeated, cutting his wife off.

“Who else have you spoken to about this?” Friedrich asked.

“You are the first country we have approached. After speaking with you we planned to send an open invitation to the surrounding countries for a summit.”

“Why did you ask us first?” Cinderella asked.

“Out of all the countries on the continent, Loire and Erlauf have become the biggest military powers. Erlauf has always prized its military, and I flatter myself to think that Loire has worked to improve its forces in the recent years,” Severin said. “If this alliance is to succeed, I believe it is key that our forces work together. The other countries will see it and follow its example,” Prince Severin said.

“Also, we were aware that Princess Cinderella is soon to be crowned Queen,” Princess Elle said. “We wished to speak to you before you took the throne. I believe our summit will be in the spring, barely a season after your crowning, so you may wish to send a representative instead.”

“We will not expect an answer now, or even during your visit, but I will admit this was the reason why we invited you,” Prince Severin said.

“Still, we hope you will enjoy your stay with us at Chanceux Chateau,” Princess Elle added with a bright smile, playing hostess. “I imagine you wish to speak to each other?”

Friedrich nodded. “Yes,” Cinderella said.

“Excellent,” Princess Elle said. She stood, tucking her kitten against her heart. “Refreshments are outside—a servant will bring them in for you. In two hours would you like to accompany me to the Gold Salon, Princess Cinderella? It has a wide array of musical instruments.”

“You play instruments?” Cinderella asked.

Princess Elle gave Cinderella an amused smile. “No, but Emele, my ladies maid, plays beautifully, and you are said to be a master dancer. I thought you might enjoy a dance or two.”

Cinderella was surprised by the detail of Princess Elle’s knowledge, but she covered it with a smile. “I would be delighted, thank you.”

“While the ladies are otherwise occupied, would you care to see our stables, Prince Friedrich?” Prince Severin stiffly asked. (Cinderella got the idea he didn’t much care to socialize.)

“Certainly, but please, call me Colonel Friedrich. It’s the title I prefer. I was hoping to discuss war tactics with you, if possible. I heard you neatly turned back a goblin invasion at your borders, and they haven’t bothered you since. I would like to hear how you managed it.”

“Of course,” Prince Severin said, giving Friedrich a rusty smile. “I only hope it does not bore you.”

“It won’t,” Friedrich said, the relish in his voice was obvious.

“Until then, please relax,” Princess Elle said before she slipped out of the room, her husband almost trodding on her heels.

As soon as they left, a maid entered the room—pushing a cart covered in platters. She unloaded a silver tea set and a tray laden with treats and tea sandwiches before exiting the salon, closing the doors behind her.

“What do you think?” Cinderella asked Friedrich.

“I believe they are genuine in their desire for an alliance. I don’t think this is a secret attempt to pull a coup on our government,” Friedrich said.

“But?” Cinderella said.

“But we’re not quite in the position that they believe us to be,” Friedrich admitted. “The war with Trieux was swift, but we did lose men, and the goblin skirmishes have not helped.”

“There is also the chasm between our people that we still need to bridge,” Cinderella added. “If our people were united as one I wouldn’t hesitate to agree to their alliance, but our differences still haven’t healed—though it is improving.”

“You will be queen shortly. You will have control over that,” Friedrich said.

“I know,” Cinderella said. “But I don’t think I can accomplish *that* much in a season. Except...”

If Friedrich was worried that they lacked the troops there was one obvious answer: Recruit citizens from Trieux. It would fix the army’s problem, and perhaps lessen the divide between the two cultures.

“What are you thinking, Pet?”

Cinderella pursed her lips and served tea. “Something I’m not sure you would agree to,” she admitted.

“You want to recruit troops from Trieux, don’t you?” Friedrich asked.

“How did you know?”

“A lucky guess. Talk it over with my father. I do not think he would object, but it is best to get his opinion,” Friedrich said.

Cinderella nodded.

“As for the alliance...the final decision will be yours, as Queen of Erlauf, but I recommend that we agree to it.”

“I would like to concentrate on uniting Erlauf,” Cinderella said.

“That should be our main concern,” Friedrich nodded. “But the siege darkness is laying on this continent is growing, and we cannot stand alone. Also, I think you can get more done in a season than you believe.”

Cinderella sighed. “I also think we should agree to this. It is a wise idea, and if they are willing to go through the headache of organizing everyone, I shall hold them in reverence forever. Should I ask to defer what our contribution will be until the summit?”

“That seems reasonable,” Friedrich said. “You are not yet queen, so we cannot make any definite promises besides our agreement—although I am certain Father and Mother will approve of the alliance as well.”

“Good,” Cinderella said. “Although Princess Elle and Prince Severin seem more reasonable than I imagined, I am far more supportive of the idea to stand with than against them. They don’t seem *tame*.”

“I know what you mean,” Friedrich said. “I’ve faced my fair share of opponents, but Severin gave off the feeling that he could maul my face if he wished. That may be leftover from his curse, though.”

“Perhaps,” Cinderella doubtfully said. “In any case, they seemed to enjoy our gifts.”

“The Princess’s reaction to the cat had me worried, but it seems she has fallen in love with it,” Friedrich said. “You chose the gifts well, Pet.”

“Thank you,” Cinderella said, leaning into Friedrich. “Do you think we can be friends with them?”

“Why do you ask?”

“They seem...like us. Or perhaps like your family.”

“You mean they are grounded and they are looking out for the welfare of their people?”

“Yes. I thought they would be more like Crown Prince Lucien,” Cinderella said.

Lucien did not enjoy the same good reputation as his half-brother and sister-in-law. Rather than being respected and perhaps a little feared, he was mostly known for his concern with fashion, and while some suspected he would be a credible king, everyone agreed it was only because he sought out Severin’s approval in almost all things that involved the Loire military and economy, and because his nobles viewed him favorably.

“You were able to win over my regiment. I have no doubt you can obtain the friendship of a princess,” Friedrich smiled, making the skin around his eye-patch crinkle.

“Thank you,” Cinderella smiled.

“Of course. Now, how should we tell the Prince and Princess we agree to the alliance?”



“You have them. They are going to agree to the alliance,” Elle said, twirling in delight as she snuggled her new cat.

“You don’t know that,” Severin said.

“But I do. Colonel Friedrich did not disappoint—he is more army than royalty. Cinderella is new to ruling, but she has a great deal of intelligence, and she cares for her people—or Queen Freja would not step aside for her. They will agree to it because of its good sense,” Elle said.

“I think it is unlikely they will refuse,” Severin admitted. “And I look forward to speaking with Friedrich.”

“What?” Elle said, almost dropping her cat. “You are looking forward to *socializing* with another royal?”

“He seems practical,” Severin said.

Elle gave Severin her mischievous smile. “Or he’s as obsessed with the military as you are, and you will be like birds of feather,” she predicted. “But that is acceptable. I like him as well—and Cinderella.”

“You like them only because they gave you a cat,” Severin said, his voice wry.

“I do,” Elle shamelessly admitted as she softly petted the kitten. “I should call him SS—which will be short for Small Severin. Although your sister will complain that’s not elegant enough, so maybe I should pronounce it Esses.”

“Will you enjoy your time with Cinderella?”

“I think so. I suspect it may take a few meetings to get her to warm up to me. But that is the way it has been for most nobles,” Elle said, unbothered by the prospect.

“Try not to shock her too badly. Although I have heard of her humility when saving her duchy, she *is* a princess and a duchess.”

“Not a rough-and-tumble Ranger. I know, I will behave,” Elle said, winking at her husband. “You’re pleased with the meeting, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Severin said. “It is nice to know we are not the only country who has noticed the changes.”

“Yes. I think the summit is a good thing,” Elle said. “There was one question they did not ask that surprised me.”

“What?”

“What of the Veneno Conclave,” Elle said. “They are usually the ones to organize inter-country alliances. I would have thought their first question would be if they were involved.”

“The fact that they didn’t ask means we likely agree on more than we think,” Severin said.

“Yes,” Elle softly said.

It had never occurred to Severin and Elle to invite the Veneno Conclave into matters regarding the alliance, because it didn’t seem necessary. Either the Conclave was blind to the threat, or it was already spread too thin and couldn’t afford to aid anyone, but it had become appallingly clear to Severin and Elle, that while individuals—like the Lady Enchantress Angelique—may offer aid, the Conclave was in no position to help.

That thought, more than any of the curses or threats the countries faced, was most terrifying to behold.