

The King and Queen of Loire

A Frog Prince Short Story

By K. M. Shea

Ariane chewed her lip with such ferocity, she nearly bit straight through it when the carriage trundled over a bump. She glanced outside, her dread growing as the horses pulled the carriage through the familiar streets of Noyers. Soon, they would arrive at the palace.

“You don’t need to worry, Ariane.” Lucien smiled at her and reached across the carriage to squeeze her hand. “They are going to love you. I promise.”

“Forgive me for disagreeing,” Ariane said wryly.

Lucien ignored her comment and continued, “I’ve already mentally prepared them—they’ve had some time to get used to the idea.”

“This is ridiculous. They’re the monarchs of Loire—they have *no reason* to accept me as your fiancée,” Ariane muttered to herself.

After uncovering the Chosen as the puppeteer behind everything that had gone wrong in recent years, Lucien (and Ariane) had stayed at Chanceux Chateau for nearly a month. Officially, it was so Lucien could closet himself up with Severin and Colonel Friedrich of Erlauf in order to send messages out to the other representatives and strategically dispatch Rangers.

But, Ariane suspected, the real reason for the delay was Lucien needed more credit to his name before he informed his parents that his self-selected bride was a *maid*.

Lucien had returned briefly to Noyers to tell his parents of his findings...and to inform them of his less-than-well-bred betrothed, before fleeing back to Chanceux—and Ariane.

“Mother sent a note ahead. She says we are to call on her and Father in the Sun Salon as soon as we arrive—if you do not need to freshen up, first?” Lucien asked.

Ariane shook her head. “It’s a rather short journey from Chanceux to Noyers—comparatively speaking. I believe I’ll be fine.” She once again smoothed the skirts of the beautiful forest-green dress Prince Severin’s modiste had made for her during her sojourn at Chanceux. (A rather useless white lace fan was given to her to match the dress, but Ariane didn’t have the faintest idea what she was supposed to do with it. The female staff of Chanceux Chateau insisted it was a weapon, but she didn’t see how.)

Lucien's smile turned affectionate, and the light in his eyes softened. "My parents will love you, if not today, then soon. They will see what draws me to you, and they will value you as well."

Ariane gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Your belief in me is touching, but you are failing to take into account all of your parents' plans for you."

"They don't matter anymore," he said firmly. "They know it was I who found the pattern in our history. Father nearly threw a celebration when I confirmed I figured it out with no help from Severin." Lucien's tone grew more sarcastic. "I think he was relieved to see proof of my intelligence. Why, I must be responsible for half the white hairs on his head."

"You won't regret showing your true self," Ariane said.

"Of course not—I got you in return!" Lucien half rose from his seat—intending to join Ariane on her side of the coach.

Ariane stopped him by applying her otherwise useless fan to his chest. "I meant rather that *you* won't regret it because it will change the dynamics of your relationship with your parents—for the better."

"Yes..." Lucien tilted his head in a charming manner and stared at her lips as he made a second attempt to scoot into the seat next to her.

"Don't," Ariane warned him.

Lucien narrowed his eyes. "Why not?"

"I'm not going to let you paw at me—particularly not minutes before I meet your parents."

"Princes do not *paw*."

"Princes don't croak either, yet you did that quite a bit," Ariane reminded him.

Lucien rolled his eyes. "Don't you see? This is why my parents shall adore you. You are too respectable and spoil all my fun."

Ariane snorted. "Hardly."

The carriage rolled to a stop.

An unpleasant mixture of dread and nervousness twisted Ariane's stomach. *Stop it*, she told herself. *You're being silly. You've entered the palace hundreds of times...just not through the front entrance after riding in the royal carriage.*

Lucien eagerly hopped out and turned around to offer his hand. “Come, Ariane.” He offered her a lopsided smile. “I’ve got you.”

Ariane knew he was speaking about more than just helping her climb out of the carriage, so she squeezed his hand in gratitude as he helped her down and took his arm when he offered it.

She tried to keep her gaze neutral as they climbed a small set of stairs that were covered with a velvet runner. *I can do this—I must do this. It’s a good warm up for when I am presented to the courts...if King Remy and Queen Nicole approve of me and I am presented.* Ariane snorted at the thought. *Another silly thought. I will certainly be presented. Lucien will not give up otherwise.*

Two footmen bowed and opened the massive glass and wooden doors for them.

Lucien guided Ariane inside, then paused. “The Sun Salon...”

“It’s this way.” Ariane tipped her head to the right.

Lucien smirked with self-satisfaction as they started down the hall. “I can see there are going to be several advantages in marrying you that I did not properly take into account.”

“I’m not going to give you new hiding places to steal away to,” Ariane warned him.

Lucien released a bark of laughter. “I expected that. No more hiding—as you like to remind me.” He paused. “I’m loathe to admit it, but it is better this way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I always felt very *heavy*. Heavy with the expectations of others, heavy with my own thoughts about myself.... I don’t anymore.”

“Do you finally see that you are much more clever and intelligent than you gave yourself credit for?” Ariane asked.

Lucien sighed. “I still think you see an overly optimistic view of me—though I won’t deny it anymore, for I would rather that you see the good than the bad.”

“Lucien.”

“Yes. I do not feel as unintelligent and slow as I assumed I would feel,” Lucien admitted. “Though I have not yet faced the lions among the nobles. That shall be the true test. Ah—here we are.”

They slowed, and then stopped in front of two giant golden doors that opened up into the Sun Salon. Two meticulously groomed footmen were stationed outside the doors.

Both of the men bowed, but the older of the pair spoke. “Shall we announce you, Your Highness?”

“A moment, please,” Lucien said.

Ariane swallowed as she stared at the door. *I love Lucien. If this is what I must do to marry him, so be it.* She wanted to laugh—for how many other women would accept a prince’s love and dread becoming a princess and eventually a queen? *But I’m not like other women. And whoever is assigned to the sunroom should be ashamed—there is dust in the crevices of the door.*

“Ariane,” Lucien said, drawing her attention back to him. “You are lovely and amazing. You must trust in that, and trust that my parents are intelligent enough to see it in you as well.” He squeezed the hand she had tucked into his elbow and leaned over to kiss her on the temple.

Ariane smiled wryly as the footmen stared at the ground with the solemnness of stones. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” He briefly rested his head against hers before he turned to the footmen. “Prince Lucien and my betrothed, Mademoiselle Ariane,” he said.

Ariane gurgled at the title, but the older footman bowed and pushed the door open with his cohort. “Announcing His Highness Prince Lucien and his betrothed Mademoiselle Ariane.”

Ariane had a love/hate relationship with the Sun Salon. It was admittedly beautiful with glossy floors made of multiple kinds of wood and shaped to form patterns, granite and marble walls that were decorated with golden moldings of suns and elven-looking women, and a ceiling covered in season-related frescos. However, while most viewed it as a display of Loire’s wealth and prestige, Ariane mostly saw all the whirls and the decorative molding as elaborate locations for *dust* to hide.

Seated on a white settee that was leafed in gold was Queen Nicole—a dainty woman who was perhaps slightly paler than was in fashion and had her sandy ringlets piled high on her head. Despite her genteel image, Ariane could see her eyes glittered with the same hidden intelligence Lucien’s boasted.

As a maid, Ariane had seen the king and queen somewhat frequently. *Though speaking to them is far different from merely seeing them.*

“Lucien, darling, welcome home,” Queen Nicole said. “Did my ears deceive me, or did the footman just announce your fiancée?”

“You heard correctly, Mother.” Lucien slapped a wide smile on his lips. “This is Ariane—the woman I told you about.”

“You mean the maid,” King Remy said. The king stood by a gleaming sideboard that was covered with fancy glass bottles of the finest alcohol in the continent. At the sight of Lucien and Ariane, he picked up a bottle and poured liquor into the gold chalice he gripped.

And we’re off to a wonderful start, Ariane thought sarcastically as Lucien drew her into the salon.

“Ariane, these are my parents—Nicole and Remy,” Lucien said—as if they needed an introduction.

Ariane curtsied deeply. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Please, come and sit.” Queen Nicole moved to an upholstered armchair and gestured for Ariane and Lucien to sit on the settee. “Lucien has told us much about you.”

Ariane kept her shoulders rolled back as she and Lucien sat down.

“I am glad I finally have the opportunity to meet you, Ariane,” the queen continued. “I was rather disappointed when Lucien announced he had fallen in love and kept you closeted back in Chanceux.”

Ariane’s eyes stayed on the queen, though she was aware that King Remy—built tall and willowy like Lucien—prowled around the edge of the room and came to a stop behind his wife.

“Time was of the essence, Mother,” Lucien said lazily. “Severin wished to get word out as swiftly as possible regarding the Chosen.”

Ariane glanced at him, surprised by the languid quality that lined his voice. She hadn’t heard him sound so uncaring since his early days as a frog.

“That is understandable, and I commend your efforts—though I still wish you had brought Ariane with you. I would have liked to meet her sooner,” Queen Nicole said in gentle chastisement.

“I apologize for our lapse in thoughtfulness,” Ariane said.

King Remy—still standing behind Queen Nicole—stared at Ariane and Lucien with a gravity that showed Ariane just where Severin inherited his glower from.

“You two met when Lucien was a frog, yes?” Queen Nicole asked.

“No,” Lucien tilted his head back so it rested on the back of the settee.

Ariane was filled with the desire to hit him. *Why is he reverting to his old ways?* “I was the maid who assisted His Highness and Monsieur Henry when the rogue mages attacked them,” Ariane reported.

Queen Nicole’s eyebrows rose. “You were the one who dropped the masked mage? With one hit from a broom?”

“He was distracted and had his back to me,” Ariane said.

“Still, it was very brave of you,” Queen Nicole said.

“She has more bravery than I,” Lucien offered.

Ariane wanted to scoff at the lie, but he continued before she could call him out on it.

“She saved me multiple times when I was a frog.”

Queen Nicole slightly narrowed her eyes. “Yes. You previously mentioned you grew to love her when she served as your...escort.”

Beyond the queen, King Remy still frowned.

“It is rather unconventional,” Ariane said.

“But romantic—rather like one of those melodramatic stories my tutors are always pushing me to read,” Lucien said.

Ariane smiled and flicked her fan open, which she used to hide her mouth. “What are you doing?” she whispered to Lucien, as she began to see just what the ladies of Chanceux Chateau had meant when they said she could use her fan as a weapon.

“I’m introducing you to my parents?” Lucien whispered back.

“You’re acting like a spoiled cad.”

“Elle wrote to me last week—she said she thought you were a charming girl who was perfect for Lucien,” Queen Nicole continued, drawing the two out of their hushed conversation.

“She *would* stick her nose in my business,” Lucien sighed. “Sometimes I wish she wasn’t trained so well as a Ranger.”

“Her Highness is very kind.” Ariane twisted her fan in her hands, half-wishing it was Lucien’s neck. *Whenever he acts like this, I am reminded that his masquerade is not the man I fell in love with.*

“She also had much praise to say for you, Lucien. She said she did not think anyone else would have been able to pinpoint the Chosen as our enemy except for you,” Queen Nicole said.

“Yes,” Lucien said stiffly. “Well. I suppose it shows all the history lessons Father foisted on me were good for something.”

“Good for something?” Is he even trying anymore? Ariane studied her fiancé. She was slightly reassured when he gave her a true smile and winked at her, but when he shifted his attention back to his parents, he almost immediately adopted a look of polite boredom. *Is he still afraid of what they will say about him? Or is it merely that his stupid act is so ingrained in him that he has fallen back into it without thinking?*

“Lucien said your father was a soldier, Ariane,” Queen Nicole said, carefully changing the topic. “Could you tell me more about your family?”

“Her family doesn’t matter,” Lucien said in a voice that was little better than a complaint. “I’m marrying her, not her relatives.”

“Even so, I should like to get to know Ariane—her past included,” Queen Nicole said gently.

Lucien shrugged.

“You are correct, Your Majesty. My father was a soldier—though he is retired now,” Ariane said.

A footman knocked on the door then stepped inside the salon. “The refreshments you called for have arrived, Your Majesty,” he said.

Queen Nicole smiled. “Excellent.”

A maid—a maid Ariane *knew*—entered the room, pushing a delicate cart. She set a tea tray and several plates of refreshments on an end table before she noticed Ariane and nearly dropped a teacup.

Ariane smiled at her—though the maid’s eyes widened, and she almost tripped over an armchair as she backed out of the room.

The queen ignored the exchange and set about pouring cups of tea. “Remy—what would you like?” she asked as she made up a plate for him.

The king grunted.

“Lucien, I had the kitchens prepare your favorite: madeleines,” the queen added.

“Wonderful,” Lucien said, his voice still indolent.

Though she wanted to shout at him, Ariane knew better than to embarrass Lucien before his parents, so—with the queen distracted with refreshments and the king still across the room—out came the fan again.

“Lucien!” Ariane hissed. “I know old habits are hard to shed—particularly around those who know us best—but this is unacceptable! You’re acting like a frog again!”

Lucien furrowed his brow. “But they—”

“Are your parents and are the most likely to accept me merely because they love you! Acting as you were before will not make me any more likeable in their eyes. Besides—you *promised*. If you cannot handle showing your parents your true self, how can they believe you will let your competency show before your people?” Ariane asked.

Lucien sighed and rubbed his eyes. “You have the right of it,” he admitted. “I have no excuses except to say you are correct and that throwing off my old self will be more difficult than I thought. Forgive me?”

There was something about the way he so easily gave in that made Ariane wary, but she couldn’t say why. “If you stop acting like this, certainly.” She snapped her fan shut and smiled at him with real affection.

Lucien briefly let his head rest against hers until Ariane’ lightly poked him in the chest with her fan. “Not in front of your parents,” she muttered.

Lucien grinned. “Shy, are you?”

“Did you say something, Lucien?” Queen Nicole asked as she held out a teacup and saucer of tea.

“Yes, Mother.” Lucien cleared his throat. “I apologize for acting like a cad. Thank you for the madeleines.”

Queen Nicole blinked in astonishment, but King Remy looked back and forth between Ariane and Lucien.

“You’re welcome, darling,” Queen Nicole said slowly.

Lucien sat up straighter in his chair. “You wished to know more about Ariane’s family, yes?”

“I did.” Queen Nicole said.

“Her Father served as soldier, then became an honor guard for Duke Villette until retiring,” Lucien began.

Suddenly, King Remy strode across the room. He stopped directly in front of Ariane, picked up her hands, and clasped them.

“Welcome to the family.” King Remy smiled charmingly, the lines of his forehead smoothing as the corners of his eyes crinkled with warmth.

“Um...thank you?” Ariane said.

Queen Nicole sighed. “Remy.”

King Remy did not release Ariane’s hands. “We must throw a ball for you. Anyone who can wrap Lucien around their finger as neatly as you have deserves a military medal,” he declared. “You will be the perfect daughter-in-law.”

“Remy,” Queen Nicole repeated—though this time she sounded nearly murderous.

The king finally turned away, and Ariane let herself breathe again.

“There is no sense pretending, Nicole, that we haven’t been searching for years for a woman who could wrangle *this*,” he motioned to Lucien.

Lucien raised an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“Until *she* entered his life, he had all the sense of a goldfish. If she can manage him, I don’t care what social class she hails from.” King Remy stood next to his wife and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Perhaps,” the queen said as she prodded her elegantly wrinkled brow with a perfectly manicured hand. “But I fear you may have just irrevocably damaged our relationship with *both* of them with your passionate display.”

The king and queen fixed their gazes on Ariane and Lucien.

“Nonsense,” Ariane heard herself say. “I feel very fortunate to receive such a...warm reception.”

“Besides, it’s all true,” Lucien said before Ariane could poke him in the ribs with her fan.

“You two are very forgiving,” Queen Nicole said.

“Now...tell us everything,” King Remy said. “How was the Summit? How did you refrain from killing Lucien during his sojourn as a frog? And when will Severin return?”

Ariane and Lucien spent no less than two hours with Lucien’s parents. It was still a little awkward—discussing how they would announce the marriage and when they would hold the

wedding had been tricky. But King Remy was such an enthusiastic supporter, Ariane found the time far more enjoyable than she had ever dared to hope for.

“You simply must wear some sort of gold gown for the banquet that will serve as your introduction to society.” Queen Nicole smiled at Ariane. “Your eyes will look simply breathtaking with gold.”

“I am most displeased it took the continent this long to realize the Chosen is behind it all,” King Remy frowned, having set aside his glee at the change in Lucien for his usual noble air. “We have lost a great deal of preparation time, and the Chosen has already managed to greatly harm us all.”

Lucien—standing with Ariane’s hand tucked in his arm—shifted a tiny bit closer to the door. “Perhaps, but even without knowing who they are, we managed to deflect most of their attacks. Now that we know what we are dealing with, the situation can only improve.”

A slight smile cracked King Remy’s lips. “Indeed.”

Queen Nicole placed a hand on her husband’s arm. “Remy, we must let them retire. We shall see them at the evening meal.”

“Yes, Nicole is right. Welcome home, Lucien. Ariane, I am pleased we finally had the chance to meet.” King Remy gave Ariane another handsome smile—revealing where her beloved had learned his charm.

“Thank you, Your Majesties.” Ariane would have curtsied, but Lucien was herding her insistently to the door.

“We will see you this evening, Mother, Father,” Lucien reported.

The king and queen smiled as Lucien and Ariane stepped into the hallway, and the footmen closed the salon doors.

“I think I need a moment of quiet,” Lucien said.

“The gardens?” Ariane suggested.

Lucien smiled sunnily. “Exactly what I was thinking.”

Together they walked down the hallway, and Ariane felt the tension ease from her shoulders. *That went...surprisingly well. Meeting the rest of the Loire nobles will be a pain—I expect no one except Elle and Severin will welcome us warmly. But with the king and queen backing us, there’s not much anyone can do.*

“How do you feel it went?” Lucien asked Ariane.

“Meeting your parents? Extremely well,” Ariane said.

A smirk briefly flickered on Lucien’s lips. “I thought the same,” he said, sounding highly pleased.

“I wasn’t sure for the first few minutes. Your father seemed quite ready to dislike me, and I think Queen Nicole was rather worried. It wasn’t until after you dropped your mask that the air of the meeting improved,” Ariane said.

“I rather agree.” Lucien nodded to a footman who opened the door for them so they could slip out into the late afternoon sunshine. “I shall have to take care that I do not fall back into my usual spoilt attitude.”

Ariane—still mulling on the change that had come over the room at that point—nodded. “Yes...” She squinted up at the sky. *I hope Lucien doesn’t relapse often. Though he repented awfully quickly considering how rudely he was acting. Wait...*

She frowned slightly as she studied Lucien, who was watching a butterfly flutter across their path as they crossed the lawn and ambled towards the gardens. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Did what?” Lucien’s blue eyes were so wide with innocence, Ariane instantly knew he was guilty.

“Lucien!” Ariane groaned. “You acted like a dolt on purpose, all so your parents would see me correct you!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ariane sighed. “Why did you do it?”

“To show them something they would really value: your relationship with me,” Lucien admitted.

Ariane tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear—the impulse to braid it all the time was lessening, but she did wish braids were more fashionable instead of all the whimsical curls and pins society had embraced. “What do you mean?”

“Normally, my parents would cherish an ancient family name and would care deeply about your pedigree,” Lucien said. “Loire is snobbish that way. But we had one thing working in our favor: my parents’ not-so-secret desire to see me act more like a crown prince and less like a spoiled-but-charismatic idiot. I suspected that if they were to see *how* much I love you, and what

I'm willing to do for your sake, Father in particular would happily welcome you. It seems I was right." Lucien looked as smug as a cat and was very nearly purring in self-satisfaction.

Ariane frowned slightly. "You could have told me your plan."

Lucien snorted. "So you could forbid me from enacting it? Not a chance."

They were quiet for several moments as they walked through the garden.

"Are you angry with me?" Lucien asked.

"No." Ariane gazed at several beautiful wild rose bushes that had bloomed early.

"Perhaps a little disappointed. It feels deceitful."

"Ariane, I found the Chosen *for you*. Nothing else could have motivated me to do so. Whether you will own up to it or not, you do have a powerful hold over me." Lucien placed his hands on her shoulders so he could tug on her to make her face him. He then smiled and caressed her cheek with his fingers. "I love you, and that has changed me. My parents would have seen so eventually. All I did was speed their realization along."

She reluctantly nodded. "I understand. Though next time you use me in one of your clever schemes, please tell me."

"Yes, Mademoiselle." Lucien lightly kissed her on the lips, then smiled down at her. "I am lucky to have you."

"I shall be sure to tell Angelique you are very grateful for your frog transformation the next time we see her," Ariane said.

Lucien winced. "I probably deserved that."

Ariane nodded and straightened the collar of Lucien's splendid blue coat. "You did."

Lucien laughed and entwined Ariane's fingers in his before they turned back to the palace, making their way home.

The End