



# Cinderella and the Colonel

## (Timeless Fairy Tales #3)

**Author:** *K.M. Shea*

**Category:** Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

**Description:** Scratching out a living in a land recovering from war and a hostile takeover, Cinderella—an orphaned, destitute duchess—is desperate to save her lands and servants in spite of the terrible taxes placed upon her by the Erlauf queen, even if it means she must don servants' clothes and work like a commoner.

Her sacrifices aren't enough, and when a mountain of debt is levied against her, she is given one season to produce the funds. Cinderella realizes it is only a matter of time before she loses everything she has struggled to protect, and it seems that all is lost until she is befriended by the debonair Colonel Friedrich—a member of the Erlauf military and a citizen of the oppressing country that rules her homeland.

From helping her break into the royal library to saving her from a rogue mage, Friedrich draws her closer and challenges her mindset of the queen and the war.

Cinderella knows Friedrich is not all he appears to be, but can she trust him with her country and her heart?

CINDERELLA AND THE COLONEL is fairy tale retelling of love, sacrifice, adventure, and magic. It is filled with humor, deception, and clean romance, and it belongs to the top selling series, TIMELESS FAIRY TALES. The books in this series take place in the same world and can be read all together, or as individual, stand-alone books.

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# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

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K.M. Shea

### Chapter 1

“How much?”

“If we cut it at your shoulders...two silver marks.”

Cinderella winced. It wasn't enough. “What if you take it all?”

The barber jerked his eyes from Cinderella's brilliant hair and gaped at her. “What?”

“How much will you give me if you take all my hair?” Cinderella asked, pushing an elbow-length lock of hair over her shoulder.

“Mademoiselle, you couldn't want to—”

“How much?”

The wigmaker studied her hair again. “The extra length will mean a finer style for the wig. Five silver marks.”

Cinderella bit her lip. He was overpaying her. Her scarlet-red hair was unusual, and her hair was thick and luxurious, but even with those qualities, the best she could hope for was four silver marks and a handful of copper coins. But the chateau roof

needed patching, and Cinderella could not afford to turn down such generosity. “Done,” she said.

The wigmaker wiped his scissors on a clean cloth. “You have fine hair, Mademoiselle.”

Cinderella gripped the arms of the wooden chair until they creaked when the man sheered the first lock from her head. “Thank you.”

Cinderella left several minutes later, her pockets heavier and her head lighter. Folk gave her odd looks as they darted past her on the street, staring at her shamefully short hair.

Her magnificent strawberry-colored mane was sheered in a pixie cut. She still had a red fringe of bangs that flopped into her eyes, but the rest of her hair was almost peasant-boy-short.

The hairstyle would bring looks of disapproval until it grew out, but Cinderella didn’t care. She needed the money. Aveyron needed the money.

Cinderella squared her shoulders and glanced at the sky. The sun was a thin disk, almost entirely blocked by the capital’s walls. “Home it is then,” Cinderella said, turning her feet towards her lands.

At the dolphin plaza, she ran into a squadron of Erlauf soldiers in their gray and burgundy uniforms. Their armor reminded Cinderella of dragon scales the way it overlapped and hinged together.

The lieutenant leading the squadron watched Cinderella as she walked past them, but he watched just about every Trieux city resident.

Three years ago, Erlauf invaded Trieux—Cinderella’s country—in a brutally short war and claimed it as Erlauf territory. Erlauf had taken Trieux with little pain, but dislike still brewed between citizens. There hadn’t been any violence since the takeover, but there was plenty of hate to go around.

With Trieux’s soldiers mostly killed or imported deep into the heart of Erlauf, the citizens of Trieux had no way to resist. The sheer number of soldiers present in the city was outrageously large considering the lack of rebellion.

But Erlauf was ruled by the cautious Queen Freja and her equally cautious consort, and both of them intended to keep Trieux in their clutches.

Cinderella left the capital—the Erlauf monarchs had renamed it Werra, obliterating its original Trieux name, Arroux—and followed a dirt road through the rolling farmland.

The sky was a canvas of colors when Cinderella reached her home, Aveyron Chateau. She slapped dust from her cloak and ventured into the boundaries of her buildings. She waved to one of the stable boys bringing a pair of draft horses into the stable for the night and paused to count the chickens before entering the chateau.

Gilbert, the land steward, and his daughter Jeanne, the housekeeper, were talking in the kitchen. When Cinderella entered the warm room, they fell silent. This was not unusual. In spite of her ventures, the father and daughter remained stubbornly formal with her, but the gaping looks of horror they gave her were unusual. They hadn’t been this appalled since Cinderella donned servant clothes as her everyday dress months ago.

“Mademoiselle,” Gilbert said.

Jeanne covered her mouth to stifle her gasp.

“Your, your hair—b-but—why?” Gilbert said, laying a hand on a table to balance himself.

Cinderella jingled her pocket, making the coins in it bounce. “Send for a carpenter tomorrow, please. We can afford to see that hole in the south wing ceiling patched,” Cinderella said, removing her cloak and hanging it near the fire.

“Mademoiselle,” Gilbert said in a pained voice.

“It needed to be done, Gilbert,” Cinderella said.

“Yes, Mademoiselle.”

“Have my step-mother and step-sisters already had dinner?” Cinderella asked.

“Yes,” Gilbert said.

“Pheasant in a cream sauce, baked potatoes, and apple sauce,” Jeanne said, finding her voice.

“Any complaints?” Cinderella asked.

Jeanne shook her head.

“Good,” Cinderella said, taking a cooled baked potato and biting into it like an apple. The potato crumbled in Cinderella’s mouth and tasted creamy. “I like this potato. What kind is it?”

“Winter Red, mademoiselle,” Gilbert said.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“It’s one of our winter crops?”

“Yes, I believe they were harvested two days ago.”

“Winter Red...I will make note of that for the next winter. Any new activity I should be made aware of?”

“Some of the men took inventory of the beehives today. Most of the bees survived the winter,” Gilbert said. “One of the horses lost a shoe today when cultivating. The blacksmith already gave him a new one.”

Cinderella nodded. “How much did it cost?”

“The account is waiting for you on your dressing table.”

“Excellent. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, mademoiselle,” Gilbert said, folding at the waist in a bow.

“A buyer has approached us. He is interested in a specific painting,” Jeanne said.

“One of the ones I have listed for sale?” Cinderella asked.

Jeanne hesitated. “No, Mademoiselle”

“If you will excuse me, Mademoiselle,” Gilbert said, bowing again before he took his leave from the kitchen.

“Good evening, Gilbert,” Cinderella called after him before turning back to his daughter. “Which painting?”

“If it pleases you, I will show you, Mademoiselle.”

“Yes, please.”

Jeanne led Cinderella through the dark Chateau, navigating by the thin slices of sunlight shed by the setting sun. Light meant candles and firewood, both of which were costly or labor intensive. To save funds, Cinderella and the servants resisted using either whenever possible.

Jeanne led the way to Cinderella’s private quarters. She dropped a curtsy before entering the room, which was a shadow of luxury and beauty. Once upon a time, Cinderella’s room was crowded with paintings, bottles of costly perfumes and oils, gold jewelry boxes, the finest crafted furniture, and sculptures.

The few reminders of those lavish times were the beautiful murals painted on the walls, and a single, ornately framed painting.

The painting was a portrait of Cinderella, finished before the war. Before Erlauf. It showed Cinderella in a beautiful, elaborate—and uncomfortable, as Cinderella remembered—ivory dress that complimented her fair skin and made the dusting of freckles on her nose and cheeks look charming rather than untidy. Her hair was piled elaborately on the top of her head, and pearls and rubies hung from her neck, wrists, and ears. She was surrounded by pink flowers, which made her gray eyes stark in the light-hued image. Cinderella smiled in the portrait. She remembered her father had asked her to be solemn for the occasion, but Cinderella couldn’t help it, so the painter had given her a wide smile.

It was a personal painting, not one meant for wide-spread admiration.

“The buyer requested the portrait of your likeness.”

“This? They want this?” Cinderella said, thrusting a finger at the painting.

“Yes, Mademoiselle,” Jeanne said.

Cinderella blinked. “Why?” she said.

She hadn’t bothered listing the painting for sale because she very much doubted anyone would actually want it.

“I am not certain, but the buyer requested it,” Jeanne said. “The offer is a tidy sum.”

Cinderella would have sold it if someone would take a few copper coins for it. “Does the buyer know the frame cannot be salvaged? I tried having the portrait removed to sell the frame alone, but the art dealer said the frame would have to be broken irreparably to get the painting out.”

“They are aware,” Jeanne said.

“Who is it?” Cinderella asked.

“I do not know the buyer’s name. He or she is making the inquiry through an Erlauf broker—the one that has bought a number of chateau belongings.”

“Von Beiler? Hm,” Cinderella said, studying the portrait. She reached out to caress the corner of the frame.

It was the last reminder she had of the lady she used to be, and of the opulence she once lived in. “But keeping everyone fed and employed is more important than a vain reminder,” Cinderella said.



“I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle?”

“It’s nothing. Try to drive the price up, if you can, but take whatever they are willing to give you for it,” Cinderella said.

“Are you certain?”

Cinderella looked once more at the girl in the portrait. Back then she was nothing but a silly girl who trusted her father to look out for her in all things. She couldn’t go back to that life, not with her father dead.

“I am positive. Thank you, Jeanne,” Cinderella said, leaving her room and heading back to the kitchen. She didn’t want to see the young housekeeper remove the portrait from her room.

Cinderella watched another Erlauf patrol squad pass through the market. “It seems to me they are patrolling more frequently.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“Perhaps they are, Mademoiselle,” Vitore, an Aveyron lady’s maid who had voluntarily become the market-stall-minder, said.

“But why?” Cinderella said as the soldiers disappear deeper into the market. “Vitore?” Cinderella said when the maid did not respond. Most of Cinderella’s servants would not speak familiarly with Cinderella. However, Vitore, a renowned gossip, tended to be less tight-lipped than the rest of the staff.

Vitore made a show of looking around the produce stall, but she and Cinderella were the only representatives from Aveyron in the market. “There are rumors someone broke into the Royal Trieux Library,” Vitore whispered.

“Oh. That’s nothing new. Those incidents started well over a year ago,” Cinderella said.

“Yes, but I heard they’re close to capturing the culprit,” Vitore said.

Cinderella winced. “I see.”

When a potential customer strolled closer to the stall, Vitore remembered herself and bobbed a curtsy, cheerfully calling out to the customer. “Winter wheat, potatoes, and carrots! All of them as sweet as summer,” she sang out like the rest of the market stall merchants.

As Vitore haggled with customers, Cinderella finished stocking the stall. She secured the chicken eggs so they wouldn’t fall, propped up a basket of goat-milk soaps, and arranged the vegetables.

“You’re set,” Cinderella said during a brief lull in sales. “A stable boy will check in with you at noon to carry any empty baskets home.”

“Thank you, Mademoiselle,” Vitore said, curtsying to Cinderella.

Cinderella wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. “Of course,” she said. “I will be...”

“...Mademoiselle?” Vitore said when Cinderella didn’t finish the sentence.

Cinderella nodded her head at a group of Erlauf soldiers who strolled into the market. There were too many to be on patrol, but they were in uniform, so it was likely they were still on duty. They all wore the burgundy Erlauf uniform covered by charcoal-gray chest armor, gloves, boots, and helm.

A man at the front of the herd wore the garb of a ranking officer. He had a long, burgundy coat that fell past his knees and was slit from behind like a swallow’s tail. Medals were pinned over his heart; his undershirt, the hem of the jacket, and his breeches were Erlauf gray. His most striking feature was the black patch covering his right eye. It was secured to his head with two black bands that stretched across his face and ran through his messy, dark brown hair that poked out from underneath his military hat. The brim of the hat was wide and drooping, and, following Erlauf custom, the left brim was pinned to the side of the crown. Based on all the medals pinned to his chest, he had to be at least a captain, perhaps even a major.

Cinderella clenched her sweaty hands into fists. It was unusual to see a ranking officer, especially one so young. He couldn’t be much older than twenty.

The market went quiet as the officer and his men strolled down the lane, stopping at Cinderella’s stand.

“Can I help you?” Cinderella said, keeping her voice polite but cool as Vitore retreated to the back of the stall.

The officer studied Cinderella as a few of his men prodded the produce. He said nothing as his eye traced Cinderella’s body.

Cinderella swallowed hard and kept herself schooled in spite of the revulsion that curled in her stomach. “Sir?” she said.

The officer returned his attention to Cinderella’s face, his eye taking in her short hair.

“Didya have a tangle with someone?” a soldier at the officer’s right shoulder asked, gesturing to Cinderella’s hair.

Cinderella stared at him for a moment before she shaped her lips into a fake smile. “How could I with all of you fine sirs patrolling this city and keeping us safe?”

A few of the soldiers guffawed.

The officer reached into a pouch that hung from his black belt. “How much are the carrots?” he asked. His voice was low-pitched, like a cat’s growl.

“Five cooper coins for a bundle, ten for a basket,” Cinderella said, overcharging the market price by two copper coins.

The officer tossed ten copper coins on the stand. “One basket,” he said, his eye fixed on Cinderella.

Cinderella felt his gaze as she tucked the coins away and dumped a basket of carrots in a sack and offered it to the officer. “Thank you for the business.”

As she held the vegetables out, a smirk spread across the officer's lips. "Until tomorrow," he said, touching the brim of his hat.

Cinderella shoved her hands behind the stand after the officer took the carrots, shielding her shaking fists from the soldiers' notice. She pressed her lips into a thin line as she watched them go.

"Animals," Vitore muttered in the back corner as she folded burlap sacks.

"Yes," Cinderella grimly agreed.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

Cinderella shivered, as if she could shake off the feeling of the officer's eye on her. "I'm off. Send word to Marie Raffin's residence if you need me," Cinderella said, snatching up a basket and frayed cloak.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," Vitore said, bobbing another curtsy as the activity resumed in the market.

Cinderella left the market and its produce and goods behind for the big buyers and sellers—the government-approved merchants. Instead of setting up their goods in open air markets and stands, the merchants owned brick and mortar shops. A few were forced out of business after Erlauf's takeover, and a few more left when faced with Erlauf's strict taxes, but many of the merchant families were still around.

Cinderella stopped outside a shop that had a sign emblazoned with a bear walking across a fallen tree trunk. A bell rang when Cinderella entered the store, getting the attention of the shopkeeper. "She is out back, Mademoiselle," the shopkeeper said.

"Thank you," Cinderella said, ducking into a back room. She skirted through a hall stuffed with shipping crates and goods and darted past a tiny office crowded with papers and books. "Marie?" Cinderella said, poking her head outside the back end of the store.

There was a small patch of grass where two horses were hitched. A young lady dressed in a comfortable but expensive dress stood in front of the horses, hand-feeding them green tendrils. "Cinderella! What in the name of Trieux have you done to your hair?" the woman said, dropping the grass to embrace Cinderella.

“I chopped it off. A wigmaker gave me a good price for it,” Cinderella said, brushing the slanted fringe of her bangs out of her eyes.

“It looks dreadful,” Marie said.

Cinderella rolled her eyes. “I am ever so glad I can count on you to hearten me, Marie.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s just...it’s so short,” Marie said, tilting Cinderella’s head to get a better look at it. “Did you really have to chop it?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I see. Well, the color is still pretty.”

“Thank you. As much as I loathe Erlauf fashion trends, I am beginning to think I should follow their example and cover my head with a scarf or some such thing,” Cinderella said.

“Why? You look pitiable to be certain, but you are by no means the only girl who has sold her hair in the past few months,” Marie said.

“Yes, but just before I left the market, a flock of Erlauf soldiers gawked at me,” Cinderella said, running her hand through her short locks.

Marie clicked her tongue. “Ruffians,” she said. “A gentleman would behave better.”

“How is business?” Cinderella asked, leaning against the hitching post.

“Well enough, I think. Armel has managed to come home at a decent hour these past few days, and he hasn’t mentioned moving to Loire for the past month,” Marie said.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“And how does your Aveyron fair?”

Cinderella shrugged. “We scrape by. All the farming changes have made it more profitable.”

“Then what drove you to beggar your hair?”

“Taxes, again,” Cinderella said, offering her palm to one of the horses. “With their cost, I can barely afford to pay Aveyron’s upkeep. I swear each month the tax burden grows heavier and heavier. If they don’t increase the tax on every servant per household, Queen Freja places a tax on every acre of farmable land or imposes a tax on glass windows.”

“And you won’t let any of your servants go?”

Cinderella shook her head. “No,” she said, her determination weighing the word down like steel and iron.

Marie sighed and dusted off her hands. “You have a hero complex, my darling Cinderella. Life would be so much easier for you if you were even a little bit selfish, like me.”

“You cannot fool me,” Cinderella said. “I recognize your shopkeeper. She was your nurse until you turned thirteen.”

Marie sniffed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. With business improving, Armel hired more help, that’s all.”

“Of course,” Cinderella said. She slid her hand down the horse’s glossy neck before



stepping back. “I need to get going.”

“You’re not going to stay for tea?”

Cinderella held up her basket. “I have work. I only stopped by to say hello and to check on my sign. Have there been any inquires?”

“A few. I left the names with my nurse; ask her for the list on your way out.”

“I cannot thank you enough.”

“It is the least I can do for you. It was good to see you, and your lack-luster haircut.”

“Take care, Marie.”

“Cinderella?”

Cinderella stopped at the doorframe and turned to face her friend.

“I, I would help you more, if I could.”

Cinderella smiled. “I know. Thank you.”

Marie mutely nodded.

“I will drop by again later this week. Until then,” Cinderella called as she disappeared inside.

## Chapter 2

The following day, the Erlauf army officer showed up again at the chateau’s market

stall shortly after Cinderella and Vitore finished unpacking the day's produce.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“Mademoiselle,” the officer said, a mocking pitch colored his tone as he spoke the Trieux title.

Cinderella brushed her bangs from her eyes. “How can I help you, sir?”

The officer tilted his head as he studied Cinderella the way a fox studies a chicken. He glanced back at Vitore—who bustled behind Cinderella.

Vitore busied herself with arranging eggs in a basket, but Cinderella did not miss the way the maid/produce-seller quivered in fear.

“Sir,” Cinderella repeated.

“Another basket of carrots, if you would be so kind,” the officer said, his smirk cutting into his black eyepatch.

“Yes, sir,” Cinderella said, pouring a basket of carrots in a sack.

“The price is still ten copper coins?”

“Yes, sir,” Cinderella said. She handed the vegetables over after the officer placed a stack of coins on the rough, wooden counter.

“Until tomorrow, Mademoiselle,” the officer said, tipping the brim of his hat before turning to his soldiers.

Cinderella said nothing and watched him go.

“He’s a rake, that one is,” Vitore muttered.

“I wish he would buy his carrots someplace else,” Cinderella said, pinching a copper coin between her fingers. “But coin is coin, even if it comes from Erlauf.”

Cinderella was churning butter when Gilbert found her. It had been almost a week since the Erlauf officer became a consistent customer. Neither he, nor his soldiers, ever said much, but the officer’s gaze seemed to linger on Cinderella during the transaction.

“Vitore is right. He is a rogue. I’ll have to be careful with him,” Cinderella muttered as she thumped the churn, working out her aggression in the buttery milk.

“Mademoiselle?” Gilbert called. The land steward’s voice was muffled as he wandered through the section of the barn where the cows slept.

“In back, Gilbert.”

Gilbert followed Cinderella’s voice to her spot outside where she thumped the butter in the shade of an ancient tree.

“Mademoiselle, the newest tax regulations have been posted. Pierre was in the capital to collect Vitore’s empty baskets and copied them down. Would you like to look at them?”

Cinderella wiped sweat from her face with her apron. “Yes, please,” she said. “Would you tell Pierre he has my thanks?”

“Of course, Mademoiselle,” Gilbert said, passing a curl of birch bark to Cinderella. (Paper was expensive, after all.) Cinderella was relieved to see the biggest tax increase was the one already imposed on carriages. It wouldn’t affect Aveyron.

Cinderella had gotten rid of the carriage collection months ago, and the carriage horses were now used to pull loads of lumber and carts of produce.

The tax on income had decreased slightly, but there was an increase in landholding tax. She couldn't be certain (as mathematics and finances were not her strong point), but Cinderella suspected there would be little change to Aveyron's taxes. Perhaps a slight increase, but nothing unbearable.

"I need to ask Pierre," Cinderella murmured.

"I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle?" Gilbert said.

"Sorry," Cinderella said, looking up from the birch bark. She had forgotten the steward was there. "If they can be spared, could you send a stable boy or kitchen girl to Lord and Lady Delattre to see if there will be a meeting? I imagine the other Trieux noble families will have something to say about this."

"Right away, Mademoiselle."

"Thank you, Gilbert," Cinderella said, handing the land steward the birch bark before wiping her hands off on her rough dress. A callous on her hand snagged on the material.

"Of course, Mademoiselle," Gilbert said.

Cinderella returned to the butter churn. "Aveyron doesn't have any carriages left, but the other remaining noble families of Trieux do. Erlauf certainly knows how to kick us where it hurts."

With all the riding horses sold and the carriage and work horses resting from a long day of work, Cinderella's only available method of transportation was to walk to the

Delattre estate. Thankfully, the Delattre estate was only a half-hour walk away, as it bordered Aveyron.

When Cinderella entered the magnificent manor, a maid took her cloak and showed her to one of the salons.

“Cinderella, darling. It is so good to see you,” Lady Delattre said, rising from the settee to embrace Cinderella.

Lady Delattre was an older woman with dove-gray hair and beautiful manners, as exemplified in the way she noted Cinderella’s shortened hair and plain day dress that was little better than a servant’s uniform, but said nothing. “Please, sit. We have a few moments to share between the two of us. How are you?”

“Well enough, thank you. How are you, Lady Delattre?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“I am quite well, now that winter has left. The cold weather makes my old bones ache,” Lady Delattre said as she poured Cinderella a steaming cup of tea. “How is your step-mother?”

“I have not seen much of her,” Cinderella reported. “Nor of my step-sisters. They mostly keep to their rooms, and when they venture out, it is to visit friends from Erlauf,” Cinderella said, holding her tea for extra warmth.

Lady Delattre sniffed. “It’s a crime against goodness, what that woman does. I do not understand how she can live off you like a parasite. To think she refuses to help you pay the taxes you incur through Aveyron—the estate of the man she married.”

“She married Papa only because the Queen Freja ordered her to, and she does pay for her and her daughters’ living expenses,” Cinderella said.

“No woman should allow a child to take on the burdens you have, darling,” Lady Delattre said.

“I am seventeen,” Cinderella said.

Lady Delattre’s sharp features softened. “You are too kind to her, Cinderella.”

“Hardly—,” Cinderella started. She cut herself off when Lord Delattre—a rail-thin man who always wore solemn expressions—entered the salon with Lord and Lady Rosseux and their eldest son, Julien Rosseux.

“I am telling you, Delattre, they will see the end of us yet,” Lord Rosseux said, his

face flushed. “They might not have killed and exiled us like they did to all other Trieux families of nobility, but that is only so they could slowly wring our wealth from us like a rag.”

“Lord Rosseux, there are ladies present,” Lady Delattre said.

“I beg your pardon,” Lord Rosseux said, throwing himself into an arm chair.

“Are the Girards, Feautres, and Leroys not coming tonight?” Lady Rosseux, as soft-spoken as her husband was loud, asked as she seated herself on a settee with her son.

“It was too far for the Girards to come at such short notice; the Feautres are indisposed, and the Leroys decided it was best not to come,” Lord Delattre said.

“You mean Erlauf’s dogs still watch us for any sign of rebellion,” Lord Rosseux said, covering his eyes. “A meeting of the only six remaining noble families of Trieux would be marked with suspicion, but a meeting between an eligible lady, her chaperon neighbors, and a family with a marriageable son would raise less interest.”

Julian, a handsome blonde who was a few months older than Cinderella, cleared his throat and blushed.

He and Cinderella looked in opposite directions and did not acknowledge Lord Rosseux’s observation.

“Lord Rosseux, I beg you to rein in your words. You have allowed your emotions to run freely,” Lady Delattre said.

“Of course I have. We’ll be forced to lay off more servants to make the tax.”

Cinderella took a sip of her tea—it was weak. Lady Delattre had probably used the



leaves two or three times already. It was a handy way to save on what was becoming an expensive import.

“We will sell one of our carriages to minimize the effect of the tax,” Lord Delattre said.

“Some Erlauf scum will buy it,” Lord Rosseux grunted.

“What will you do, Lady Lacreux?” Julian asked. With his quiet temperament, he took after his mother more than his father.

Cinderella put her tea cup down. “It won’t affect Aveyron. I sold all our carriages sometime ago.”

“You persist in retaining all your servants?” Lady Delattre asked.

“Yes,” Cinderella said.

In a country that used to brim with lavishly dressed lords and ladies, only six families remained. The rest had been slaughtered in the takeover or exiled. The remaining nobles were left to face an enormous tax burden. Most of the families, like Rosseuxes, made the taxes by lowering the wages of their servants or dismissing them. Cinderella was an extreme opposite. She sold everything she could and kept all of Aveyron’s staff on. The Delattres held the medium ground, dismissing some of their servants and selling some of their possessions.

The taxes were harder on some families. The Delattres owned the least land and the smallest taxable income. Cinderella, on the other hand, possessed the largest estate and the highest title—Duchess. The taxes imposed on Aveyron were the highest in the country.

“Did you hear the Erlauf Queen gave the Lefebvre Estate to an Erlauf army officer?” Lord Delattre said.

“I did. Lefebvre must be rolling in his grave,” Lord Rosseux said. “The queen is taking her time in handing out the estates. They’ve been in royal possession for two, almost three years.”

“I imagine they’re trying to decide which of their army officers to plant where. Their country places the highest importance on military service. Even nobles are required to serve,” Lord Delattre said.

“Working, pah,” Lord Rosseux said.

“Aren’t most of the officers titled nobles?” Julien said.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“It is my understanding that officers are esteemed as highly as members of nobility—perhaps higher in social standing, if not economic. Most of the officers, I believe, are sons of noblemen,” Lord Delattre said.

“Giving out Trieux estates is a brilliant way to reward them, then. If officers are second or third sons, they won’t inherit a title or lands,” Julien said.

“Brilliant of the Erlauf Queen and her consort, yes,” Lord Delattre said. “But it saddens me to see my countrymen’s lands going to...,” he glanced at Lady Delattre and Cinderella and trailed off.

Cinderella smoothed her plain dress on her legs, and was surprised when Lady Delattre took her hand. “You look tired, darling,” the older woman whispered.

“I might be a little, but my work is not without its rewards,” Cinderella said.

“You will not let even a single servant go?”

“No.”

“You are just as stubborn as your father,” Lady Delattre said, shaking her head. “It is very noble of you, but what will you do when you marry? Julien and Marcus cannot afford Aveyron.”

Cinderella kept her face a smooth mask. When Cinderella’s father was alive, no one had dared to push the topic of Cinderella’s marriage. Now that he had been gone for over two years, Cinderella’s marriage seemed to be the only thing noblewomen could

think of.

It wasn't like the groom was going to be a surprise. Cinderella had two choices: Julien Rosseux or Marcus Girard—who was several years younger than her.

It was expected she would marry, and with taxes as high as they were, she would be forced to marry without a dowry. Her husband would take her to preserve Trieux nobility, not to inherit Aveyron, as had once been the reason for her popularity. When she married, it was likely that Aveyron and everything in it would have to be sold, for no one would want an estate of such monstrous size to care for in addition to their own.

Cinderella wished there was another way, but she couldn't see it.

“Cinderella?”

Cinderella gave Lady Delattre her best smile. “I apologize; my thoughts clouded my mind for a moment. I do not know what I will do,” she said.

Lady Delattre sighed. “If only my Rodolf hadn't died in the war,” she said, referring to her deceased son. He never would have been a candidate for Cinderella's hand before—the Delattres weren't of high enough standing to be joined to Cinderella's family in the lavish times before the Erlauf invasion.

“I am sorry, Lady Delattre,” Cinderella said, resting her fingertips on the older woman's hand.

Lady Delattre took a shuddering breath and bravely nodded.

When Cinderella removed her attention from her saddened hostess, she met Julien's gaze.

The shy young man blushed and looked away.

Cinderella folded her hands together and returned her attention to Lord Delattre and Lord Rosseux's conversation. She wouldn't give up on Aveyron until she had exhausted all other options.

Julien and Marcus were nice enough, but Cinderella's priority was Aveyron.

"You seem distracted today, Mademoiselle."

Cinderella tore her gaze from the squad of patrolling soldiers. "I beg your pardon," she said, setting the officer's usual bag of carrots on the counter.

"There is nothing to pardon," he said, coins clinking in his hand. "It was merely an observation."

Cinderella said nothing and held her hand out for the coins as the officer did not seem inclined to place them on the counter as usual.

The officer held Cinderella's gaze, his mouth slanting in a smirk as he brushed his fingertips against her palm, touching her hand longer than necessary.

Cinderella jerked her hand back. "Thank you for your business," she said, her tone as stiff as the set of her shoulders.

Three soldiers stood with the officer instead of his usual pack. One of them laughed at Cinderella's reaction and nudged the officer.

The officer still smirked. "What is your name, Mademoiselle?"

Cinderella, in the process of sliding the coins in the money box, almost dropped the

coins. “What?”

“Your name.”

Cinderella puffed up like an anxious cat. Behind her Vitore squealed and dropped a basket of winter potatoes. She could lie, but the farce wouldn’t last long. Hair as red as hers was rare, and everyone knew the produce stand belonged to Aveyron.

“Mademoiselle?” the officer said, his smile growing more crooked.

“Cinderella. My name is Cinderella,” she finally said.

The officer tipped the brim of his hat. “Until tomorrow, Cinderella.”

He left with his cronies, exiting the market the same way he entered.

“Mademoiselle,” Vitore said, hovering at Cinderella’s shoulder.

“I know,” Cinderella said, her heart icing over as the officer disappeared from view.

With his exit, market business resumed. The cobbler went back to mending a busted shoe; a baker once again shouted his list of baked goods, and even the meat chickens five stalls up started clucking again.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

The tap of the cobbler's hammer on the bottom of the shoe barely resumed before a mousy-looking woman scurried across the market. "Lady Lacreux, whatever will you do?" the mousy woman wailed.

"About what?" Cinderella said, checking on the potatoes Vitore had dropped.

"About the officer. You've caught his eye, mark my words. He's going to try and seduce you," the woman said, wringing her hands.

"The Erlauf devil," added the milkmaid in the stall next door.

"He can try all he wants. I will ignore him," Cinderella said, placing the potato basket on the counter.

The mousy woman tisked. "But he's with the Army."

"I fail to see what that has to do with my refusal."

"The queen has a soft spot for her army lads," the tanner's wife said, joining the mousy woman. "She may let him yank you before her with the complaint that you have scorned him."

"Just so," the mousy woman emphatically nodded.

"Mademoiselle," Vitore said, hunching with distress.

"It will be fine, Vitore," Cinderella said before turning to her growing audience. "All

the man does is buy carrots from me. He has given me no reason to think he sees more to the exchange than obtaining vegetables.”

“Oh, but he asked for your name.”

“And you cannot miss the way he eyes you—like you was a wee rabbit and he a fox.”

“You best watch your step with him, Lady Lacreux,” the potter across the way called as he wrapped a clay pot for a customer. “No telling what he might try.”

“He makes it plain he comes here for you,” the sharp-mouthed milkmaid said, feeding her goats some hay. “He enters the market and heads for you, as if you’re the only person here.”

“Aye,” said a woman selling candles. “The rest of us is plain as dirt. You, Lady Lacreux, you’re why ‘e comes ‘ere.”

The public reckoning warmed Cinderella. Most of the after effects of the war with Erlauf were negative, but not all things were bad. Previously no commoner would have spoken to Cinderella. The change probably had something to do with seeing her work side-by-side with her servants, but their concern softened Cinderella even if their worries were aggravating.

“I will be careful,” Cinderella said to the expectant crowd.

“Good,” the mousy woman said. “We want none of their kind messing with our nobles!”

“Couldn’t you stay away a few days?” the ropemaker, a friend of the milkmaid, asked.



“What a grand idea,” Vitore said.

“No,” Cinderella said, wiping her hands on her apron. “He hasn’t done anything yet to make me worried.”

“He brushed your hand as if he was caressing your cheek,” Vitore muttered.

“If he makes any further insinuations, I will avoid the market,” Cinderella said.

The mousy-looking woman planted her hands on her hips. “If you’ll excuse me for speaking so, Lady Lacreux, if that foreign devil looked at one of my daughters the way he looks at you with that eye of his, I would pack her up and send her to her aunt in the country before the day was over.”

“Perhaps,” Cinderella said.

“But?” the tanner’s wife asked.

“But I do have the protection of Aveyron, and my title. They don’t mean as much as they used to, but it should be enough. Furthermore, I have made many allowances, but I will not let Erlauf keep me from conducting business,” Cinderella said, sticking her chin out. She paid her taxes and upheld the law like a good conquered noble, but she would not let this feckless officer affect her any further!

The commoners exchanged glances. “Pride of nobility,” the milkmaid offered.

“Foolish thing,” the ropemaker said, shaking his head.

“I thank you for your concern. Should the situation grow dire, I will not hesitate to take action,” Cinderella said.

“Nobles, think they’re above the worldly desires of others,” the tanner’s wife said, shaking her head in disgust.

Cinderella had to choke back the laughter. There was truth to their words—Cinderella would have to be stupid to miss the wolfish way the officer looked at her. But they were forgetting—those from Erlauf hated the citizens of Trieux just as much as the citizens of Trieux hated them. Why would the officer want anything to do with a high-ranking noble whose heritage, country, and inheritance was something he hated?

It was dusk when Cinderella started home. The market stall had been packed up earlier in the afternoon, but Cinderella had stayed behind in Werra for...reasons. Not that it mattered—she failed in the goal she meant to accomplish.

The walk from Werra improved her flagging spirits. The dirt roads were peppered with people taking their goods home and walking with their pack animals and flocks. The countryside was painted hues of orange and crimson from the setting sun, and the birds still sang.

It was beautiful, and it required no work on Cinderella’s part to enjoy it. She treasured the quiet moments when she didn’t have to worry about her future or taxes.

A farmer on a cart pulled by two mules doffed his cap to her as he passed by, his wagon laden with bags of grain.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

Cinderella elbowed her cloak out of the way and waved.

“At times like this it seems like nothing has changed,” Cinderella said, tossing her head to get the fringe of her bangs out of her eyes. She watched wild geese and swans fly overhead, returning to the north as winter fled the onslaught of spring.

The beauty of the moment was shattered by raised voices.

Further up the road, a small caravan of four wagons was stopped. One cart was filled with cages of ducks and chickens, another had produce, the third was packed tight with goods—blankets, pots, and the like—and the final wagon held a handful of commoners. Cinderella recognized the drivers and the passengers as sellers and craftsmen from the market.

A squad of Erlauf soldiers had stopped them. Some of the soldiers were rattling the poultry cages, and several others were going through the wagon of goods.

A soldier tore open a sack from the produce wagon, inspected it, and tossed it back into the wagon, untied.

The commoners protested.

“Please have some respect,” the driver of the produce wagon said as he reached to tie the sack shut.

“We’ve only come from the market. Whatever you’re looking for, we don’t have it,” an older man—the potter—said.

A baby cried,. Its mother bounced it up and down to try and cheer it.

“Silence,” the lieutenant—the leader of the soldiers—said.

Cinderella caught up to the farmer with the wagon and mules. He pulled his team to a halt a short distance away from the stopped caravan and watched the interchange with stormy eyes.

The two soldiers going through the goods abandoned the cart for the produce wagon.

“Anything of interest?” they asked the soldier who opened sacks and tossed them back in the wagon.

“Nope,” the soldier said, helping himself to a handful of peas from the wagon. He bit a pea pod in half and tossed the rest on the road to be stomped into the ground.

The driver of the produce cart—the farmer—scowled deeper as he watched the soldiers ransack his cart. The baby cried louder in spite of the mother’s best attempts to shush it.

A boy—perhaps thirteen-years-old or so—climbed off the passenger wagon so he could restore order to the wagon of goods.

One of the soldiers noticed and returned to that wagon. “We didn’t say we were finished, boy.”

The boy ignored him and tucked a clay jar beneath several blankets.

“I said we aren’t finished,” the soldier said, grabbing the boy by the collar of his shirt. He pulled him away from the wagon and pushed him, sending the boy sprawling to the ground.

Two Trieux men sitting in the passenger wagon stood, and the driver of the produce cart leaped from his seat.

Things were going to get ugly.

“That’s enough,” Cinderella said, hurrying forward to step between the soldier and the boy. “What is going on?”

“It’s none of your concern,” the soldier sneered.

“Lady,” Cinderella said.

“What?”

“It is Lady Lacreux to you, soldier,” Cinderella said, using every bit of her manners schooling to stand tall and elegant in a way that demanded respect. “And it is my concern as we stand on lands belonging to the Duchy of Aveyron.”

The soldier hunched his neck into his shoulders. “What?” he repeated.

“These lands are my lands. So would you be so good as to explain what you are doing on my estate?” Cinderella said, folding her arms across her chest as she tipped her head back and looked down her nose at the soldier.

“Um,” the soldier said.

“I beg your pardon, Your Ladyship,” the lieutenant, mounted on the only horse, said. He urged the beast a few steps forward so he could address Cinderella without shouting over the wailing baby. “We received information of several armed ruffians traveling through these parts. For the safety of all, we are performing random checks.”

“Of course,” Cinderella said, magnanimously bowing her head. “When one is searching for ruffians and the like, it is always the wisest course of action to shake down farmers returning home from the capital.”

The lieutenant’s saddle creaked as he leaned. “Perhaps I allowed my men to be too enthusiastic in their duties.”

“Perhaps,” Cinderella said. “You have conducted your search. Are they not free to go?” Cinderella said, gesturing liquidly with her right hand. (Since the takeover, Cinderella had been bitter about investing so many years in dancing and fan-work, as fun as it was, and finding herself stupid in the ways of running an estate. But perhaps there were some uses for learned elegance.) As if testing Cinderella, a soldier rattled a chicken cage, making the bird squawk.

“If you are so worried they are secretly ruffians, please allow me to vouch for their character,” Cinderella said.

“They are your serfs?” the lieutenant asked.

“No, but they all have stands in the market near Aveyron’s stall. I know them quite well. As a member of nobility, I despise all forms of thievery and bullying. I can promise you none of the people before you are the kind to delight in such behavior,” Cinderella said, taking care to highlight her noble accent, making her words crisp and clear.

The lieutenant dipped his head to her. “Very well, Your Ladyship,” he said before wheeling his mount around to face his men. “Back into formation. We return to Werra.”

The soldiers left the wagons and formed two lines. They marched back towards the capital, leaving ruffled commoners and peasants in their wake.

“Thank you, Mademoiselle,” the produce wagon driver said.

“Of course. Are you all alright?” Cinderella asked, extending a hand to the fallen boy.

He scrambled up without any help and bowed three times to Cinderella, almost falling again when he tripped on his bare feet. “Yes, Mademoiselle. Thank you, Mademoiselle.

“Blessings over you, Mademoiselle,” the mother of the howling baby said.

Cinderella smiled. “Thank you, take care,” she said before continuing ahead, splitting off on a small road that ducked between some of Aveyron’s plowed fields. It was a

farming path, but it would cut minutes off the walk.

“Mind you watch out for that Erlauf officer, Mademoiselle,” the potter said.

Cinderella raised her hand to acknowledge the comment and kept walking home.

### Chapter 3

When the Erlauf officer strolled up to the market stand, Cinderella pretended not to notice him. Her back was to him as she sorted through a basket of onions, but she knew he was there because the market went quiet in the way it did only when he was around.

It was earlier than usual. Some of the market vendors hadn't arrived yet. Vitore was gone with the milkmaid stand-neighbor, fetching water for the day. The maid's absence made Cinderella uneasy.

She was reassured when the baker started humming—sounding much closer than the location of his stand warranted—and the ropemaker nonchalantly sidled up to the milkmaid's goats and started petting them.

“I heard you ran into some trouble yesterday, Cinderella,” the officer said.

Cinderella stopped sorting and reluctantly turned to face the high-ranking soldier. Based on the quirk of his lips he knew very well she was Lady Lacreux, the Duchess of Aveyron. “Trouble?” Cinderella said, widening her eyes. “I have no idea to what you are referring.”

“I was told you came upon some soldiers as they were in the process of conducting random searches,” the officer said, tugging on his black eye patch. He was alone this time, although he still wore his army uniform.



“Oh, yes,” Cinderella said. “That is true, but I have no recollection of there being any trouble.” Normally she would ornament such a statement with her brightest smile, but she did not want to encourage this officer in any way.

The officer studied Cinderella, his face blank and emotionless for the first time since he started coming to the market.

His scrutiny was unnerving, so Cinderella busied herself with the carrots. “The usual?” she asked.

“No.”

Shocked, Cinderella looked back to the officer. “I beg your pardon?”

“Today I have a different offer in mind,” the officer said. “But first, my mother would tell me introductions must be made. Cinderella—who-has-no-curiosity, allow me to introduce myself. I am Colonel Friedrich of First Regiment of the Dragon Army.”

Cinderella almost dropped the carrots. She immediately fixing her reaction, casually brushing her fringe of bangs out of her eyes. “Colonel?” she said, as if enquiring after the weather.

“Quite so,” the-no-longer-nameless-officer said.

Oh dear. I should have listened to everyone, Cinderella thought. Although she was able to keep herself schooled, the baker came down with a coughing fit and the ropemaker froze—he didn’t even notice when one of the milkmaid’s goats started nibbling his shirt.

A colonel was one of the highest offices an Erlauf soldier could achieve. A colonel ran a regiment of over 600 soldiers and served directly under a general. There were

only a handful of them in existence, and the rank was a great honor.

As a conquered noble, it was safe to say Colonel Friedrich's rank was considered higher than Cinderella's—even though Cinderella had more assets and a higher monetary worth. Such was the value Erlauf placed on the Army.

What this meant was Cinderella could not safely disregard the Colonel. If he was so inclined, he could make her life a misery. In the span of a few heartbeats, the Erlauf officer had gone from an irritation to a danger Cinderella could not flee.

“I am honored to make your acquaintance, Colonel Friedrich,” Cinderella said.

“I'm sure,” the Colonel dryly said.

“What can I do for you, sir?” Cinderella asked.

“I would like to spend the day with you.”

Cinderella twisted her fingers together. “I am afraid I must respectfully decline, sir.”

“Oh?” the Colonel said, his voice weighted with his displeasure.

“Yes, I have...prior engagements,” Cinderella said.

“Then tomorrow?” the Colonel said, tapping his fingers on the rough wood of a beam that supported Aveyron’s stand.

Cinderella almost winced. He was going to be persistent, was he? Perhaps it was better to bore him into giving up. “I may be able to accompany you today if...”

“If?”

“If my time was properly compensated,” Cinderella said.

The Colonel went very still. His eye was neither friendly nor amused as he studied Cinderella. She could almost feel the power and danger radiating from him as he asked, “You want to be a paid woman then?”

As a proper lady, Cinderella didn’t know exactly what kind of work the colonel referred to, but she knew it was a kind of work no lady would do. Cinderella’s anger burst past the walls of decorum. “WHAT?” she shrieked, stepping back from the Colonel.

“You were the one who said it,” the Colonel said, his stance once again relaxed and liquid.

“I said compensated. I work in Werra in the afternoon, and I cannot afford to miss the pay! I meant as long as you expected me to trail behind you, I had better get a pay equal to my job—or I will never be able to accompany you,” Cinderella said, the words rushing from her mouth before she was aware she thought them. When she realized what she said, she almost clamped her hands to her mouth, but settled for stiffly awaiting the Colonel’s anger.

To Cinderella’s surprise, the man seemed amused. “You work? Why?” he said, his familiar smirk flashing on his lips.

“Why not? Have you something to say about working for a living?” Cinderella said, pointedly staring at the medals pinned to the Colonel’s uniform.

“No, nothing at all,” the Colonel said, chuckling with a maddening confidence. “I would be happy to pay you for your missed wages. I shall return in an hour then to pick you up.”

“Are you so sure you can cover my pay?” Cinderella asked.

“I assume it isn’t more than a handful or two of copper coins?”

“A day’s work is one silver coin,” Cinderella said, giving herself an outrageous raise.

The one-eyed Colonel shrugged. “Hardly more than spare change. In one hour, then,” he said before setting off.

Cinderella angrily gawked at his back as he left the market. A silver coin was spare change? “Filthy-rich dandy,” Cinderella scoffed, angrily stuffing carrots back into the

basket.

“Mademoiselle?” the ropemaker ventured.

“What?” Cinderella hissed.

It rankled her that an army officer could treat such a sum like it was nothing when Cinderella—a duchess—clambered for every copper coin she could get.

The ropemaker winced. “Are you well?”

“I’m fine,” Cinderella said, calming as the officer slinked out of sight. “Just...irritated.”

The ropemaker hesitated. “Are you going to be alright?”

The anger left Cinderella like a cloud on a windy day. “I think so,” she said, her shoulders slumping. “He doesn’t seem...terrible.”

“None of them do, until they reveal their true colors, Mademoiselle,” the ropemaker said.

“I know,” Cinderella said. “But he’s a Colonel. I dare not offend him; the risk isn’t worth it. I can only try to bore him in hopes that he will move on.”

“Here lie the remains of the Sanct Pavilion, which saw the signing of the Griford Agreement. The Griford Agreement, as you may recall, was the third piece of the Glitter Accords, the articles that gave jurisdiction over magical matters to the Veneno Conclave,” Cinderella said, indicating to a pile of rock and rubble. “Trieux, Erlauf, Kozlovka, and Loire were the first countries to agree to the Glitter Accords.”

“Hey,” the Colonel said.

Cinderella ignored him and pointed the white flap of cloth she fixed on the end of a thin, whip-like willow branch to a beautiful but abandoned stone building. “Next door is the historic Lutenau. Most recently, it was used as the capital offices for Trieux nobles when conducting governmental business. It was built over two hundred years ago, however, as a summer home for an Erlauf lord who was madly in love with a Trieux princess.”

“Cinderella,” the Colonel said.

“The Lord, Lord Worgl, built it as close to the Trieux Royal Palace as he could,” Cinderella said, spearing her makeshift flag in the direction of the palace. The prism-like points of the palace towers could be seen from just about anywhere in Werra, but they were especially close now. “He desired to be close to his lady love, although the princess scorned him. One day when he approached her in the public gardens, the princess’s dog bit him. The bite grew infected, and Lord Worgl was rushed home to his manor in Erlauf. He nearly died from the bite, and he lost a finger in the process. It was not all in vain, for he fell in love with and married the woman who nursed him back to health, earning him the nick-name One-Less-Worgl—the man who is credited with inventing the Erlauf tricorn hat, which can be adjusted without a thumb.”

“Do you plan on doing this the whole time?” the Colonel said, his head lolling to the side.

“I beg your pardon?”

The Colonel indicated to Cinderella’s flag. “The history lesson. You cannot possibly mean to take me on a guided tour all afternoon.”

Cinderella batted her eyes. “I only want you to get your money’s worth, sir.”

“So this is your part-time job? Historic tours?”

“Historic Tours of locations from Erlauf Lore, yes,” Cinderella said.

“So if I pay you another silver coin, can we stop the tour, discard the chaperon, and go eat?” Friedrich said, turning to stare at the Aveyron housemaid that trailed approximately five feet behind him.

Oh yes. I really hate him for being rich, Cinderella thought as the housemaid sniffed and fanned herself with a paper fan.

Cinderella kept her expression pleasant as she spoke. “Forgive me, sir, but it would be improper for us to be without a chaperone, and I could not stand to see you overpay me so.”

It was amazing how intensely the Colonel could stare with one eye. “I see,” he said, the two words dripped with sarcasm. (He must have known she overcharged him a great deal for the “tour,” and that her maid was no proper chaperone, but was there to ensure he did nothing...untoward. Even if it was a little late, Cinderella would try to mind the wisdom of her fellow market stall sellers.) “Is there any way I can convince you this history lesson is unnecessary?”

“None whatsoever,” Cinderella said, her voice sunny and bright. “If you look to your left, you will see the Reflective Pool of Serenity. It is empty now, but previously it held a family of gold-scaled fish. Those fish, or their ancestors more correctly, were gifts from the Erlauf King Cristoph II.”

The Colonel didn’t try to mask his impatient sigh, but he trailed behind Cinderella with remarkable perseverance. After the first hour, Cinderella thought she would have shaken him off, but the persistent Erlauf officer stayed with Cinderella until her voice died just before sunset.

“And that was why pointed shoes went out of fashion,” Cinderella said, her voice rough like sandpaper. She gave the Aveyron maid a grateful smile when the woman offered her a water skin.



The Colonel squinted at the red horizon. “Are you done now?” he asked as Cinderella drank her fill.

“Yes, I think so,” Cinderella said, handing the water skin back to the maid.

“You sound like a camel.”

“I would not know what a camel sounds like, sir,” Cinderella said, resting a hand on her throat. Never before had she given such an ungodly long tour. She almost bored herself to tears. How did the Colonel endure it?

“Excellent. Shall we stop at an inn or pub to get you a drink?” the Colonel said.

“I must respectfully decline, sir, for I am expected at home,” Cinderella said, her voice giving out several times.

The Aveyron maid nodded in approval.

“Of course,” the Colonel said, as sweet as sour dough.

“I hope you enjoyed the tour. Have a good night, sir,” Cinderella said, curtsying. She—and the maid—turned away from the Colonel when the officer called out after her.

“Tomorrow, then?”

Cinderella stopped and turned to face him. She struggled several times to speak before she could make her tired voice say, “I beg your pardon?”

“I will pay you another silver coin for your afternoon, if you are willing,” the Colonel said.

Cinderella frowned. “You want to do this again?”

“I was hoping you would be willing to forgo the history lesson.”

Cinderella opened her mouth to reply, but the Colonel beat her to the punch. “No, I shall spare your camel-voice and answer for you: you will insist on another sightseeing tour with the chaperone?”

“If you wish to spend the afternoon together,” Cinderella said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

The soldier sighed. “Fine. Tomorrow, then. I will find you at the market,” the Colonel said, bending the brim of his hat to Cinderella before he made his exit and walked towards a group of Erlauf soldiers who were congregating beneath an arch a short distance away.

“Erlauf. Nothing but trouble,” the Aveyron maid said before she made her way to the market where Vitore and a cart were waiting.

Cinderella watched the Colonel go and felt for the silver coin in her pocket. Tonight she would have Pierre test its authenticity. There was little she could do to dissuade the Erlauf Colonel. Her best chance was to continue stringing him along on tours and hope he grew bored with it, and with her.

“Cinderella!”

Cinderella grimaced as a pig wiped its snout on her dress. After the Erlauf Colonel bought her afternoons for a full week, Cinderella suspected Marie would pay her a visit. Cinderella had hoped it would be at a time when she was not filthy and muddy.

So much for hoping.

“Cinderella, you cannot hide from me! Jeanne said you were out here,” Marie said, sounding just as imperial as she used to back when she wasn’t a merchant’s wife but a duke’s daughter.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Cinderella shouted, skidding in the muck and mud the pigs created by dumping their water trough. She almost fell flat, but steadied herself by

grabbing a great, black pig.

The animal ignored her and nosed through food scraps.

Cinderella edged her way out of the mud hole. She popped over the wooden fence just as Marie—in a clean, crisp dress—rounded the corner of the dairy barn.

“Oh, Cinderella,” Marie sighed.

“The pig boy is helping out in the high pastures today. Someone had to feed the pigs,” Cinderella said, trying not to shudder as she looked at her dress. The thighs up had remained clean, but lower, the pigs had nosed and brushed against Cinderella’s legs, making the hemline of her dress filthy and her legs coated in mud.

“Yes, but did you have to crawl into the pen to feed them?” Marie said.

“I will know better next time,” Cinderella grimly said.

“You shouldn’t have to know at all!”

“Marie,” Cinderella said.

“I know, I know. I would hug you, but I will decline to touch you. You smell like refuse.”

“I understand. What brings you to Aveyron?”

“I heard about the officer,” Marie said.

“Ah,” Cinderella said, starting for the dairy barn. “Who told you?”

“The whole capital talks of it. One of the maids mentioned when the Erlauf officer started stopping by your stand every morning. That was forgivable. Irritating, but not dangerous. But, Cinderella, is it really wise to spend your afternoons with him?”

“I don’t have a choice. Didn’t your maid tell you? He’s a Colonel.”

“He is? Oh dear,” Marie gasped. “I thought it was unusual you would even look twice at an Erlauf rat. What do the two of you do?”

“First of all, it is three of us. Even I am not so bold that I would accompany a stranger without a chaperone, so a housemaid attends to us. And it is not a true social interaction. I give him tours—although I am beginning to run out of places tied to Erlauf history to visit. I have tried to make it as business-like as possible. He even pays me for the tour.”

“You’re trying to get rid of him, then?”

“As best I can. It is not going well,” Cinderella said, stopping at a well. She dropped a bucket into well and waited for it to sink before drawing it back up.

“Do Julien and Marcus know?” Marie asked, naming the two eligible, Trieux noble boys.

“Julien must. His family is too close to Werra not to have heard of it,” Cinderella said, grunting as she pulled the bucket of water over the lip of the well.

“And yet the Rosseuxes have made no move?”

“I haven’t heard from them since I last saw them at Lord and Lady Delattre’s.”

“How unusual. One would think they would sweep in and snatch you up before the

Erlauf rat ruins you,” Marie said, backing away from the well when Cinderella started scrubbing.

“I am not surprised. Lord Rosseux is bitter, but cautious. If the Colonel is petty, he might get nasty if someone tried to step in,” Cinderella said.

“But it is so dishonorable to leave you alone to defend yourself. What of the Girards?”

Cinderella considered the family for a moment. They—from Lord and Lady Girard to fourteen-year-old Marcus—were a younger sort of family. “They might step in and make an official marriage offer if they lived any closer. As it stands, it will take a good week or two for the news to reach them.”

“You could write to them,” Marie suggested.

Cinderella, pink skinned from the cold water and the spring air, shook her head. “If they make an offer, I will have to accept,” she said, studying the chateau, which austere stared down at her from a hill. “I’m not ready to give Aveyron up, yet.”

“Foolish girl. If you wait much longer, the worst might happen—and no one will want you,” Marie said wrapping a shawl around her shoulders.

Cinderella didn't reply.

Marie crossed the short distance between them. She placed her hands on Cinderella's shoulders and shook her. "Stop dreaming and wake up. Someday soon, you will have to take care of yourself and put your needs above the needs of your servants. You are running out of time! By staying here, you are only delaying the inevitable, or, worse—bringing personal ruin upon yourself!"

"Marie—," Cinderella started.

"Don't! Can't you just...Couldn't you....," Marie's face crumpled as she tried to keep from crying. She let go of Cinderella, only to hug her tight.

"Your dress, it'll get ruined," Cinderella said.

"I don't care," Marie muttered.

The two friends hugged until the tension left Marie, and she slumped into Cinderella's shoulder. "Can't you be selfish? You're all I have left—I don't want to lose you too," Marie said, her voice fragile.

Cinderella patted Marie's back. The takeover was difficult on Marie in a different way.

Marie was a Trieux Duke's daughter, or she had been. Several years ago, she met and fell in love with Armel Raffin, her husband. He was wealthy, but he lacked a Trieux title and noble blood. Marie's father forbade her from marrying him, but she did

anyway.

So Marie's father disowned her. He cut all ties with her, and her family acted as if she had died rather than married beneath her station.

When Trieux was invaded, all of Marie's family was executed. No one was left, except for Marie—who had been spared because of the separation.

Marie had been furious with her father for refusing to acknowledge her marriage, but she was perhaps even more enraged with him for dying before they could make any sort of amends.

"I hate them," Marie said, as if reading Cinderella's mind. "I hate those Erlauf soldiers."

"Unfortunately they are here, for better or for worse. And we are no longer citizens of Trieux, but citizens of Erlauf," Cinderella said when Marie pulled away.

Marie sighed. "It is as you say. Could you stay home from the market for a few days?"

"I don't know," Cinderella said. "He knows I do not enter Werra on the days the market is closed," Cinderella said.

"Try it," Marie suggested. "He may forget about you in your absence and go plague another pretty girl."

"Perhaps," Cinderella said, grimacing as she studied Marie's dress. It was ruined, pressed with the same filth on Cinderella's work dress.

Marie paid the damage no mind. "It will work. You can see to the activities of



Aveyron for a few days, and he will forget you. It is a winning solution.”

“Perhaps, but what if he sends inquiries after me?”

“Inquiries can be ignored. Social interaction is the real danger. And surely this Colonel wouldn’t come to Aveyron to bother you.”

“You don’t think so?”

“Good heavens, no. Even an Erlauf rat couldn’t be that shameless.”

## Chapter 4

Marie was wrong. He was that shameless.

Cinderella was considering rugs with Jeanne when Gilbert delivered the news.

“Gilbert, wonderful timing. We could use your help. Which rug do you think we could get a better price for? The bear fur from Verglas or this velvet rug? The imported bear skin is rarer, but this velvet is awfully close to Erlauf burgundy,” Cinderella said, prodding the rug with her foot.

“You have a visitor, Mademoiselle,” Gilbert said.

“A visitor? One of the Trieux nobles?”

“No, Mademoiselle.”

“Marie or one of her husband’s minions, then?”

“No, Mademoiselle.”

Cinderella clasped her hands to her heart. “Not a tax collector?” she said in horror.

“No, Mademoiselle,” Gilbert hesitated. “It is an officer of the Erlauf Army.”

Cinderella felt as if a large rock had fallen into her stomach. She hadn’t been visited by an army officer before. It was either the Colonel or someone he dispatched on his behalf. “Mercy on my soul, he is a pushy thing,” Cinderella said. “Where is he?”

“I left him standing in the front hall with a footman,” Gilbert stiffly said. Apparently his good manners and delight in decorum did not extend to Erlauf houseguests, or he would have seen the Colonel to the least shabby sitting room.

“Thank you, Gilbert. Jeanne, may we resume this conversation later?”

“Of course, Mademoiselle,” Jeanne curtsied.

Cinderella left the shadowy library and made her way to the front hall.

The Colonel stood near the front entrance, admiring a vase of wildflowers.

“Colonel Friedrich, what brings you to Aveyron?” Cinderella said, briefly curtsying to the officer as he removed his attention from the flowers and turned to face her.

“Good afternoon, Cinderella. I am here for you, of course.”

“I beg your pardon, but I do not understand.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“This is the fourth day you have been gone from Werra. I thought your absence was an indicator of poor health. Although you seem to be quite well,” the Colonel said, his eyes traveling the length of Cinderella’s body.

“I am fine, but I thank you for the inquiry,” Cinderella said.

The Colonel clasped his arms behind his back. “What kept you from the market?”

“I was needed here in Aveyron,” Cinderella said, lying through her teeth. Besides deciding what items to sell, there was very little Cinderella could do at Aveyron except get in the way of the servants.

“You will soon return to spending your days in Werra?”

“Yes,” Cinderella reluctantly said. The extra coin she received from the Colonel kept her fortified for the past few days, but she had to return to Werra for reasons besides money.

“I am heartened to hear that. May I place an early reservation on your afternoon—and your maid’s afternoon, I suppose?”

Cinderella studied the Colonel. “Haven’t you tired of history, or my voice?” Cinderella asked, her tone closer to sincerity than the stiff politeness she usually used.

“Not yet,” the Colonel smirked.

Cinderella briefly closed her eyes. “Very well. I shall see you tomorrow afternoon?”

“I eagerly await the moment. Until then, be in good health,” the Colonel said, tipping his hat to Cinderella before he made for the door.

The footman leaped to open the door for the Colonel, and slammed it on the officer’s heels. Although the footman said nothing, the look of distaste on his face was clear.

“I agree,” Cinderella said. She shivered in the chill of the chateau and wrapped her arms around herself before she made her way back to the library where the rugs awaited. She was almost out of the entrance when her step-mother, Lady Klara, called.

“Cinderella,” she said. Her voice was crystallized ice: sharp, jagged, and as cold as winter.

“Yes, Step-Mother?” Cinderella said, brandishing the title like a weapon.

Lady Klara was just as cold as her voice with icy eyes and hair the color of a stormy sky. She always stood straight, as if she had an icicle pressed to her back, and her expression was cool. Today, probably due to Cinderella’s heavy-handed words, her top lip curled in a sneer. “There was an Erlauf guest?” she asked as she elegantly descended the staircase that led to the second floor of the chateau.

“Yes, Step-Mother.”

“They did not wish to see me?”

“No, Step-Mother. He was here for me,” Cinderella said.

Lady Klara folded her hands in front of her. “I see. I apologize for detaining you so. Carry on.”

“Thank you, Step-Mother,” Cinderella said, curtsying before she fled the room, shivering. Lady Klara had that effect on her. The woman never liked Cinderella’s father, and Cinderella was no better in her eyes.

Cinderella co-existed with her step—family because their presence made her unmarried state possible. Without them, Cinderella would not be chaperoned, and Aveyron would be snatched from her by the queen of Erlauf before Cinderella could turn eighteen.

However, whatever positives there were to their presence, Cinderella still disliked them—and the feeling was mutual. Lady Klara was from Erlauf. She was the widow of an army officer who was slain in battle.

Housing the enemy, feeding them, and seeing to their desires rankled Cinderella. Thankfully, they seemed to dislike their housing situation as much as Cinderella did, and mostly kept to their rooms or spent all of their time with other Erlauf friends.

“It seems those from Erlauf will not give me rest,” Cinderella said. “I wish they would all just leave.”

“The Erlauf Count Linz once stayed here. During his visit he...,” Cinderella trailed off as she watched another squad of Erlauf soldiers troop past. They seemed to be out in high numbers today. She would have to wait to perform one of her less-than-legal errands thanks to the sudden influx.

“Cinderella?” the Colonel said, shattering Cinderella’s thoughts.

“Yes?”

“What did this count do during his stay?” the Colonel said before he yawned.

“He broke his toe and hobbled for the rest of his life. This way, please,” Cinderella said, holding up her makeshift flag as she led the Colonel and her maid deeper into the historic district of Werra.

“You made that up,” the Colonel said.

“I did not.”

“You must have. You cannot tell me a Trieux history book would contain that kind of information. No Erlauf historic text would.”

“It’s true,” Cinderella said, passing five soldiers as she led the Colonel through what remained of the Royal Gardens.

“Mademoiselle!”

Cinderella paused, recognizing the voice.

“Mademoiselle Cinderella,” a young boy called as he scurried to catch up.

Cinderella squinted, recognizing the young boy as a servant from Aveyron. If memory served her correctly he was the youngest shepherd in the duchy. “Yes, Florian?” she asked.

“Vitore sent me. She needs assistance,” the young boy said, panting.

“Is something wrong?”

Florian shook his head. “Customer bought out all our potatoes for the day.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“Didn’t we bring a dozen bushels?” Cinderella asked.

“Aye. Cook up at the castle bought ‘em, but he needs help transporting ‘em. Someone needs to mind the stall while Vitore ‘n me deliver the potatoes,” Florian said.

Cinderella almost clapped her hands in glee. All the potatoes were sold out? And it was still moderately early in the day. What good luck!

“Of course we can return,” Cinderella said.

“Are you going refuse to give me my money’s worth, then?” the Colonel asked, his voice lazy.

Cinderella winced. She had forgotten him. “No, of course not, sir.”

In Cinderella’s hesitation the housemaid stepped forward. “I will go will go with young Florian.”

Cinderella’s sense of decorum briefly fought with her great desire for money. “Are you sure you do not mind?” Cinderella asked as the housemaid stalked closer.

“If you will pardon me, Mademoiselle, I will send someone from the market to watch you. The Tanner’s wife, perhaps,” the maid said, whispering to Cinderella.

Cinderella smiled in relief. “Very well. That sounds excellent, thank you.”

The shepherd and maid bobbed in a bow and a curtsy before they scrambled in the

direction of the market.

Cinderella watched them go before she continued on her course, heading through the historical district.

“Where are we going?” the Colonel asked.

“To the Ruins of Alsace,” she said, naming a historic Trieux building that Erlauf had torn down.

“We’ve already visited Alsace. Twice.”

“Yes, but I did not tell you all there is to know of it,” Cinderella said.

“I can hardly wait to hear more,” the Colonel said, his voice lacking enthusiasm.

Cinderella glanced over her shoulder. The bored Colonel stared at her, and behind him walked the five soldiers from the gardens. “I am sure,” Cinderella said.

“When will you desist playing tour guide?” the Colonel said.

“I should think never. It is the greatest aspiration of my life to give historic tours,” Cinderella lied as they approached the toppled building. The grounds surrounding it were a wreckage of rubble and stone.

The Colonel snorted. “I see. I suppose those of Trieux have a different, perhaps inferior, sort of aspiration they shoot for.”

Cinderella stopped and swung around to face him. She was about to blast him with some sharp words she would regret later but was silenced by the sight of the five Erlauf guards.



They followed Cinderella and the Colonel all the way to the ruins, an area rarely patrolled, and even less often frequented by normal citizens.

“...Cinderella?” the Colonel said.

Cinderella tilted her head as she studied the soldiers.

The Colonel briefly turned to see what Cinderella gawked at. “Pay them no mind,” he said, returning his attention to Cinderella.

Cinderella ignored his advice. There was something off about the soldiers. Cinderella watched as one of the men swung a quiver off his back. Her heart stopped when she realized what it was.

The soldiers were dressed in Erlauf burgundy and gray, but their quivers held arrows fletched with feathers dyed Trieux lavender, and their swords were the ornate, beautiful kind Trieux nobles used to use.

They were not Erlauf soldiers.

They were assassins.

Cinderella shifted her gaze from the assailants to the Colonel. He stared back at her with boredom.

He didn't know.

Cinderella could make an excuse and dart off, and he would be killed. One despicable Erlauf officer would be wiped from the world, and one of her problems would be solved.

She could be wrong. Maybe they weren't here to kill him, but no one would blame her if she didn't speak up, right?

The Colonel blinked his dark eye at her. "Cinderella? Are you finally done?"

All she had to do was leave.

The assailants spread out in a formation, giving her the opportunity to turn her back.

But she couldn't.

Cinderella scrunched her nose up. "Blast," she said before grabbing the Colonel's hand. "Come on."

"What?" the Colonel said, sounding amused as Cinderella dragged him into the ruins.

"Don't slouch along, run," Cinderella hissed, jumping a fallen support beam. She pulled him behind a crumbling wall. "Stay down," she ordered before she peeked around the wall, looking for the men.

"What has gotten into you?"

"Those weren't Erlauf soldiers," Cinderella said.

"What are you talking about? Of course they were."

"Then why did they carry Trieux weapons?" Cinderella asked, glancing at the crouching colonel.

"What?" he said.

“They were obviously hired to kill you,” Cinderella whispered, spotting a soldier who was headed into the stone maze of the ruins.

“Impossible,” the Colonel scoffed.

Cinderella ducked, avoiding an arrow that clipped the wall.

“Impossible, you say,” Cinderella said, her voice dead.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“What about you? You aren’t a no-name. They could be after you,” the Colonel argued as Cinderella abandoned her flag and indicated he should follow her.

“Why would they kill me with Trieux—fletched arrows?” Cinderella asked, jumping a toppled wall before she darted into what once was an office. It was one of the few room in the building in which all four walls were still intact.

The Colonel said nothing, but stepped in front of Cinderella, as if to take the lead. “No you don’t,” Cinderella said, sliding in front of him. “You have no idea where we are. I’m leading.”

“The situation has changed, Lady Lacreux. This is no historic tour,” the Colonel said. Somewhere along their flight, he had unsheathed his sword. He held it so naturally at his side Cinderella hadn’t noticed it until he brought it near to her body.

“Don’t you think I know that? But you cannot fight five men. We have no choice; we must retreat. You don’t know where we are, and I do; therefore, I lead,” Cinderella said, starting through an open doorway.

“You’re a civilian. You aren’t trained in evasion techniques.”

Cinderella snorted. “I’m certainly a great deal more trained at evading in Werra than you are,” Cinderella said, heading for a winding staircase posted in the corner of the room. It led to the second floor, which was visible through great, gaping holes in the ceiling.

“Are you kidding? This cannot be stable enough to hold us,” the Colonel said.

“Would you stop fussing and just follow me? You’re wasting time,” Cinderella said, halfway up the staircase.

“This is insane.”

“Walk only where I walk,” Cinderella instructed when the Colonel joined her on the second floor.

Cinderella edged down the hallway, navigating her way through yawning chasms and weak floors. Although the air was cool, sweat beaded on her forehead. She tensed when a floorboard creaked when the Colonel stepped on it, but it held him.

When Cinderella heard footfalls on the stairs, she led the Colonel into a side room. Most of the floor was gone. Cinderella thought the Colonel would hiss something at her, but he was quiet and faced the hallway, crouched in a defensive position.

Cinderella grabbed a ladder that leaned against the closest wall. With the ease brought by practice, she lowered the ladder across the hole. She fixed it between two support beams, creating a precarious bridge.

“Come on,” Cinderella said crawling across the hole.

“Will it hold me?” the Colonel asked.

“I should think so. A quite obese soldier used it once and it didn’t budge then. Come,” Cinderella bid.

Rather than shuffle across on his knees, as Cinderella had done, the Colonel stooped and leaped from rung to rung, his sword outstretched.

The ladder buckled, but the Colonel safely crossed. Cinderella hauled the ladder

across the gap. A lavender fletched arrow struck the ladder from below.

The assailants worked soundlessly. They did not call to one another, but Cinderella could hear the pattern in their footfalls.

Cinderella slid the ladder across the small bit of floor and threw a rock into the next room. She stepped up onto the crumbling outer wall—which was only a foot or two above the floor—and motioned for the Colonel to join her. When he did, she took another brick and threw it into the room she slid the ladder into.

Cinderella heard the thud of an arrow embedding into wood in the next room—her mislead had worked—before she picked her way along the crumbling perimeter wall.

Cinderella and the Colonel shuffled along, traveling the length of the building. When they reached the far end—the same end at which they entered the ruins—Cinderella shimmied down a thick length of ivy.

When she reached the ground, the Colonel slid halfway down the vine before letting go and dropping with the elegance of a cat.

It was unfortunate, but besides the rubble, Alsace was stranded in an expanse of green lawn. Thankfully, once they cleared the park, soldiers were close.

“We go this way,” Cinderella whispered, pointing in the direction of the Royal Trieux Library. “There are more patrols there. We will run into reinforcements faster. Ready?”

“Yes,” the Colonel said before he and Cinderella started running.

Cinderella was grateful for her knee-length skirts—sprinting in a full-length dress would have been torture—although she kicked up pebbles that stung her bare skin.

Cinderella didn't hear the soldiers, but the Colonel must have, for he wrenched Cinderella aside just in time to avoid getting hit by an arrow.

A soldier with a bow stood on the second floor of the ruins. He fitted another arrow to his bow as one of his companions chased after Cinderella and the Colonel, Trieux sword extended.

The Colonel dragged Cinderella in a serpentine pattern, snaking back and forth. It kept the archer from taking an easy shot, but it let the soldier with the sword catch up.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

The archer shot at the Colonel just before they darted in between two buildings. He missed, but they weren't safe yet. There were still another two blocks to run before they could join the swirling masses of Werra.

Cinderella yelped when the pursing soldier caught the hem of her skirts and yanked her backwards.

The Colonel could have left Cinderella there. If he was smart, he would have. Instead, he lunged after her. He sliced through Cinderella's skirts—shortening the back by several inches but freeing her—and kneed the soldier in the side.

He nailed the soldier in the sternum with the hilt of his sword, driving the man back, before grabbing the soldier by the throat and smashing his head against a wall.

The man wore a helmet—so it did not knock him out—but it jarred him enough that the Colonel was able to kick his feet out from under him and slam him to the ground.

“Keep running,” the Colonel said.

Guessing what he was about to do, Cinderella turned on her heels and fled.

The Colonel joined her a few moments later, his sword red with blood.

Cinderella shivered, her blood chilled, but she could hear the noises of activity and animals. She sucked in air before screaming, “HELP!”

The Colonel blew a metal whistle and hauled Cinderella along by her elbow. They



ran an additional block before they were surrounded by a sea of Erlauf soldiers wearing the dragon-plate-like armor and dressed in Erlauf burgundy.

“Five men. One is down one street back, dead. Two archers, one dagger user, and another swordsman,” the Colonel said.

Two squads peeled off from the mass of soldiers, heading for the ruins of Alsace. The remaining soldiers moved into an organized, protective formation around Cinderella and the Colonel.

Cinderella stared at the Colonel’s bloodied sword.

“Cinderella.”

Cinderella snapped her head up so fast her neck cracked. “Yes?”

“Are you well? Were you hurt?” the Colonel said.

“I’m fine,” Cinderella said, her voice sounding muffled and echo-y to her ears.

“It’s important—the weapons were likely laced with poison. Did the swordsman even graze you?” the Colonel said.

Cinderella rocked back and forth on her feet. “No. I stumbled in the ruins, but that’s all,” she said, her eyes falling back to the Colonel’s sword. “I don’t feel very well,” she said before her legs gave out underneath her.

Something roared in her ears. All Cinderella could think of was the Colonel’s red sword and the man he killed. She was vaguely aware that the soldiers around her stirred.

“—see she receives medical attention for you, sir.”

“No, I will take her there myself. It’s just shock, I think. No small wonder. I doubt she was ever chased by assassins before,” the Colonel said.

Cinderella felt arms around her before she was picked off the ground. She would have protested, but her vision was blurry, and it felt like her heart might pop out of her chest.

“She didn’t run off and leave you?”

“No. I’m ashamed to admit it, but she was the one who noticed…”

“—brave little thing.”

“Yes.”

Cinderella’s head rolled back against her will, and she lost track of the conversation as her stomach heaved. “I’m going to be sick,” she said.

The Colonel and his soldiers didn’t react fast enough.

Half an hour later, Cinderella sat in a guardhouse with a steaming cup of tea in front of her. Two soldiers were posted at the door, stone-faced and holding wicked-looking scythes.

“May I go home?” Cinderella meekly asked.

They ignored her.

Cinderella looked back at her tea, inhaling the soothing, herbal scent.

The Colonel entered the room, his hair damp—probably from bathing—and wearing a fresh uniform.

Cinderella guilty looked away. “I apologize,” she said.

“It was understandable. Normally, I would have let you lie down where you were, but I did not want to leave you so close to danger,” the Colonel said.

Cinderella grimaced, upset with herself and with the Colonel. It wasn’t her fault she couldn’t stand the slaughter. But there was something shameful about throwing up on the man who was carrying her to safety.

“The nurse reported you were fine,” the Colonel said.

Cinderella leaned into the steam of her cup. “Yes. May I please go home now?”

“Not yet,” the Colonel said, taking a seat across from Cinderella. He clasped his hands together and stared at her with an alarming amount of intensity. “Why?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why did you tell me? You could have made an excuse and left. They would not have followed you. Why did you run with me?” the Colonel said.

Cinderella pressed her lips together and said nothing.

The silence stretched between them, twisting around Cinderella like a snake.

“Why not?” Cinderella finally said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:37 am*

“Look at me, Cinderella,” the Colonel said, his voice sharp like the edge of a sword. “I want an answer. My country has done its best to grind you under its heel. You hate me and everything I stand for. Why?”

Cinderella squirmed under the Colonel’s intense gaze before blurting out, “Because you’re still a person. You’re an Erlauf officer, but even Erlauf soldiers deserve life. I won’t just sit there and watch someone be murdered in cold blood, even if the victim would be you. It’s wrong. It’s horrible.”

The Colonel leaned back in his chair, the first hints of a smirk curling the corner of his lips.

“I still hate you,” Cinderella darkly added, lifting her tea cup to her lips.

The Colonel’s suggestion of a smirked bloomed. “I wouldn’t expect any less,” he said.

“Then why are you smiling?” Cinderella irritably asked, scrubbing her hands through her short hair.

“Because you are universally kind.”

“So?”

“It’s a very rare and admirable trait.”

Cinderella drank her tea and ignored the compliment. A part of her still couldn’t

believe she dragged the Colonel off, but she was glad she had. Her father would be proud of her, even if the Colonel was from Erlauf.

“Someone is bringing porridge for you—the nurse suggested you eat a little. After you eat it, you may go,” the Colonel said.

Cinderella eyed the Colonel over her teacup and said nothing.

As if on cue, a soldier carrying a wooden tray entered the room, two officers trailing him.

“Sir,” the officers saluted.

The lower-ranked soldier set the tray down in front of Cinderella and saluted before he left.

“Major Timo and Captain Sigmund. What did you find?” the Colonel asked.

“Two of the assassins were killed in combat. The third was captured, but the fourth escaped, Sir,” one of the men said, saluting the Colonel.

Cinderella stirred her porridge suspiciously.

“Excellent. What does the captive have to say?”

“Very little. We will try torture, of course—”

Cinderella abruptly shoved the tray of food away from her, once again feeling sick. She arranged her arms on the table top and rested her head on them.

A chair scraped.

“Perhaps it would be best to continue this conversation at a later time,” the Colonel said as he walked around the table. “Send the Scarlet and Storm Companies to comb the ruins for tracks and traces. Double the night patrols. Has General Harbach been notified?”

“He has, sir. As has the Commander The Colonel sighed. “Very good. Thank you, men. I will speak to you in the holding area in a few moments.”

“Yes, Sir,” the men saluted before leaving the room.

Cinderella was very still as she remembered with whom she was dealing. The Colonel wasn’t an everyday soldier; he was a powerful man who could wield an entire regiment to do his bidding. And Cinderella just told him she hated him.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking when I asked them to report in,” the Colonel said before Cinderella felt him brush the fringe of her bangs.

Cinderella very slowly picked her head off the table. “There is nothing to apologize for, sir,” she said, her composure returning.

“Oh, no. You have saved my life. You must call me by my first name: Friedrich.”

“It would not be appropriate, sir,” Cinderella said, avoiding his eye by stirring her porridge.

The Colonel shrugged. “We shall argue about this later. I must go. After you eat, a squad of soldiers will escort you home.”

“That is unnecessary—”

“It is very necessary, and they are under orders to see you all the way to the front

door of Aveyron. You will not wriggle out of this one, Pet,” the Colonel said.

Shocked by the improper nickname, Cinderella could only gape.

“Eat your porridge and rest. Stay at Aveyron tomorrow. I will send some men to check on you. Until then,” The Colonel said, running a finger down the back of Cinderella’s hand before ducking out of the room.

Cinderella gloomily stared at her porridge. Yes, she had forgotten how powerful the Colonel was.

Friedrich was in his office, his hands folded behind his head, when Colonel Merrich found him.

“What are you smiling at? You look like a creepy, old geezer,” Merrich said, leaning on the doorframe.

Friedrich’s smirk grew. “Just thinking.”

“Of?”

Friedrich didn’t answer.

“I heard about the attack against you today. General Hardbutt threw such a fit his heart almost stopped. I will be impressed if he doesn’t kill you himself for being alone with a civilian with no escort when you report in tomorrow morning,” Merrich said, playing with the medals pinned to his chest.

Friedrich stopped smirking. “So you heard?”

“Everyone within hearing distance of Werra heard.”

“Ah.”

“So this girl you were with, word is she is a Trieux noble?”

Friedrich renewed his smile. “Cinderella Lacreux, Duchess of Aveyron.”

Merrich whistled. “That’s some pedigree and title she’s toting. She’s one of your prospects?”

“She is the prospect,” Friedrich said.



“What is she like?”

“She is unexpectedly kind. She hides her hot temper behind pretty words and manners, but her loyalty goes deeper than the oceans,” Friedrich said.

“Is she beautiful?” Merrich asked, folding his arms across his chest.

“She is exotic.”

“Funny, I never thought you would be able to like, much less love, a Trieux brat.”

“I did not think I would either, but Cinderella...” Friedrich trailed off. “I want her,” he said.

Merrich strolled into the office and ruffled Friedrich’s hair. “I’m so happy for you. Congratulations, good boy.”

“I’m not a dog,” Friedrich said, kicking his friend away. “And even if I’ve decided on her, she still hates me.”

“So you have your work cut out for you? That makes it all the more fun. You’ve always enjoyed a good challenge.”

“She’s filled with hate,” Friedrich said, ruefully smiling.

“Do you want some help with her?” Merrich asked.

“Please, no. You would make her hate me more,” Friedrich said, standing up in a liquid movement of deadly elegance.

Merrich chuckled and slapped Friedrich on the back. “When will you tell your men the good news?”

“Not for as long as I can avoid it.”

“They’re busy bodies. They’ll find out soon enough.”

“I know.”

“I can’t wait.”

Friedrich slung an arm across Merrich’s shoulders and dragged him into a headlock. “If you tell them, I will pay a social visit to your mother.”

“That’s playing dirty,” Merrich said.

“Perhaps, but you keep your patty-paws out of my love affairs.”

“Got it. I’ll leave the Trieux Troll alone.”

“Her name is Cinderella.”

“Could you have said that and sounded anymore love-sick?”

“Shut up. Let’s go eat.”

“After you, lover-boy.”

“I hope she slaps you in the face when she meets you,” Friedrich grumbled.

“More and more, your descriptions of her intrigue me. You call her exotic and theorize she would punch me. She must be built like an ox.”

Friedrich briefly reminisced on Cinderella’s beauty: her adorable button nose and the breath-taking combination of her brilliant red hair, the dusting of freckles, and stormy gray eyes. It was doubtful there was a man alive who would call her anything but beautiful...but Merrich was unfortunately handsome and of the same military rank as Friedrich...

“Her build is...,” Friedrich trailed off misleadingly.

“Thought so. Why else wouldn’t one of the other Trieux tramps snatch her up for their sons? At least she has that charming personality, eh?” Merrich said.

“At least,” Friedrich echoed, a smirk hanging from his lips. He needed time to sweeten Cinderella up to him and his country, but when she finally came around, he was going to take great delight in introducing her to Merrich. “Her gait is...impressive.”

“She scuttles, does she? Well, Mutti always said personality and intellect are more important than beauty.”

“Did she? Your mother is a wise woman,” Friedrich said.

“Of course she is. Anyway, you could probably hire trainers or something for your future Trieux misses. They could help. Maybe.”

“I see.”

## Chapter 5

The day after the attack against Colonel Friedrich, Cinderella broke into the Trieux Royal Library.

As a result of the increased patrols city-wide, the patrols around the library were lessened to free up soldiers. Cinderella may not get another good chance for her illegal activity, so she waited until the late afternoon before she went to Werra, making her way to the closed library.

A kerchief tied over her eye-catching hair served as her poor disguise, but none of the patrolling soldiers looked twice at her, so Cinderella judged the time to be perfect.

She hummed as she walked to the back end of the library, which was pressed against the backside of the Trieux House of Lords—where the Trieux nobility used to meet to vote on matters of the country.

Both buildings were closed, so Cinderella only had to worry about outdoor activities.

Cinderella kept her gait slow and even, acting unconcerned as she adjusted the basket on her arm. “Rats,” she said when she rounded the corner. The back window she used to squirm indoors was boarded up from the inside.

Cinderella pushed against the wooden block, testing its strength. It didn’t budge.

“So much for that route—although it took them months to figure out that was how I got in. Where else can I...ah-hah,” Cinderella said when she spied an open window. It was higher up, well above Cinderella’s head, but its wooden shutters hung, barely secured enough to shield the open window from the weather. The scarcely useful shutters were casualties from the mistreatment the building suffered when Erlauf marched against the capital.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Cinderella traveled the back end of the building to peer around either corner. A patrol wasn't due for a few minutes, but one could never be too careful.

Cinderella retreated to the window and pushed a crate against the wall. She was still too short to reach the wooden sill. Cinderella piled several planks on the crate before she tried again.

Cinderella stood on her tip toes, and still lacked the height. She jumped and her hands brushed the window sill, but she wasn't strong enough to pull herself up. She hung there for the barest moment before her arms gave out, and she fell back on the crate.

She placed her hand on her hips and glared at the wall before she tried climbing up, wedging her fingers and feet in cracks and gaps between the stone blocks that made up the library.

She climbed up only one layer of the blocks when a voice behind her said, "So you're the lawbreaker that's been evading my men for the past year?"

Cinderella shrieked, lost her grip, and fell back on the crate. She lost her balance and toppled over the side. Cinderella rubbed her stinging side as she boosted herself into an upright position. "Ah, Colonel Friedrich. What a surprise it is to see you here," Cinderella said when she realized who stood with her in the back alley.

It was her rotten luck he would find her.

"This explains those skills of evasion you displayed yesterday. You had months of practice from leading soldiers on long, merry chases whenever they happened upon

you clawing your way inside the library,” the Colonel said.

“What? Do you mean—? No, I would never attempt to break and enter! Why, I was trying to secure the open window, of course. Do you know how much damage the wind and rain could do to the books? It surely is an oversight to leave it open,” Cinderella said, gravely shaking her head as she planned her exit. It made her uneasy to be alone with him.

The Colonel narrowed his eye. “It’s impressive you’ve evaded attention so long with your illicit actions. Although I suppose I cannot blame my men for not finding you. I hardly recognized you myself with your hair covered so skillfully.”

“What? Sir, I am offended by your presumptions,” Cinderella said, looking down her nose at the Colonel as he gathered up her basket.

“Don’t tell me you go in there to actually use the library?” the Colonel said, going over the contents of her basket: a bottle of cheap, ash-based ink; two quills; matches; and curls of birch bark.

“I, sir, am a law-abiding citizen. As such, I would not enter the library as it is currently outlawed,” Cinderella said, brushing off her skirt. “But as you are here, I imagine you can deal with the unsecured window yourself. Would you be so kind as to give me back my things, sir?”

“Friedrich,” the Colonel said, setting the basket down. “Come here.”

“I beg your pardon?” Cinderella asked.

The Colonel wriggled his fingers in a come-closer gesture.

Cinderella minced over to the Colonel. “What,” she started. “Do you want—put me

down!” she shrieked when the Colonel picked her up by her waist.

“What are you doing?” Cinderella hissed as the Colonel climbed the crate.

“Helping you break the law. Can you reach the ledge?”

Held higher, the ledge was shoulder-height. “Yes,” Cinderella said, scrambling to grasp the ledge. She set her feet against the stone exterior wall and tried to climb in. She shrieked when the Colonel pushed against her backside—boosting her up and touching her posterior. “Sir! This is highly improper!”

The Colonel only chuckled.

Cinderella purposely booted him in the neck before she squirmed through the window, falling inside. She landed on a narrow walkway set a foot or two down from the window.

Cinderella poked her head out the window. “My basket?”

“Coming up with me,” the Colonel said, tying the basket to his belt. The Colonel made the climb much more gracefully. He jumped and grabbed the sill before pushing off the wall with his feet like Cinderella had attempted.

A few graceful, slithering movements, and the Colonel eased his way inside.

“Wow. It’s a disgrace in here,” the Colonel said, squinting at the dust-coated walkway and railings, and the dusty shelves of books that extended before him like a wooden army.

“What do you expect? No one has been allowed in since the takeover,” Cinderella said, snatching her basket from the Colonel’s belt.

She marched down the walkway, taking a set of rickety stairs to the base floor.

“It’s getting dark. Will you be able to see in here well enough to read?” the Colonel asked.

As he had all but thrown her inside, Cinderella estimated the Colonel wasn’t likely to drag her off to jail. His manners seemed to promise that he would not do anything indecent, even though they were alone, either. So she replied, “There are candles,” as she orientated herself in the library and looked for the places where, in previous trips, she upset clouds of dust.

“Funny, you don’t strike me as the reading type,” the Colonel said.



## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

“I’m not,” Cinderella said, leading the way between two rows of books.

“You must be. Why else would you break in a library? Unless...do you hawk the books?”

“What? No! First of all, what kind of lowlife steals from a library? And secondly, all the books have the Trieux royal seal on them. Only a madman would buy something with the Trieux seal these days,” Cinderella said.

“It does not escape me you have a moral and a practical reason for your lack of black-market selling,” the Colonel said.

“I’m not here to read for fun, nor am I here to steal,” Cinderella said, stopping at a shelf partially cleared of dust.

“Then what are you here for?”

“Research,” Cinderella said, selecting several volumes of leather-bound books before she walked deeper into the library.

In the very center of the library were several desks pushed together to form a work station. There were unlit candles placed in half globes of silver. Cinderella set her books down in the dying light before she dug out the matches from her basket and lit two of the candles.

The silver globes let Cinderella direct the candlelight to make a sort of spotlight, and they sheltered the light from twinkling up to the ceiling—a light source patrolling

soldiers were sure to notice.

The Colonel pawed through one of the books Cinderella stacked in front of her. “Farming? You’re researching farming techniques?”

“Yes,” Cinderella said, opening her ink set and dipping a quill in it before she started taking notes on the scraps of birch bark.

“I don’t understand. Why?”

“In case you have forgotten, sir, I am a lady. My upbringing did not include classes on crop rotation, field yields, and formulating fertilizer.”

“What about your servants? Don’t they know about farming?”

“The basics, yes. But they knew only what we grew. Aveyron’s income came mostly from livestock.”

“And that’s no longer an option?”

“It still is a main source of income, but the taxes your sweet queen imposes on me do not allow for me to waste acreage. I must use all the resources I have available. We can’t keep doing what we always did. We have to expand and investigate other options. Like winter crops. This was the first season we successfully cultivated them since well before my grandfather’s time,” Cinderella said, turning a page in her book.

“You should grow flowers,” the Colonel said. “Everyone from Erlauf is crazy about flowers.”

“Mmm,” Cinderella said as she scratched out a list of possible summer crops.

The Colonel studied their darkening surroundings. “Any idea where the map books are?”

“Before the takeover, I never once set foot in this building in my life. It took me ages to find the agricultural section. I have no idea where to find any other type of book,” Cinderella said.

“Of course. I’m going to have a look around. I’ll be back shortly, Pet,” the Colonel said, striding off into the shadows of the bookcases.

Cinderella watched him go with narrowed eyes. She needed to talk to someone about the Colonel’s conduct. He toed the line of propriety, but he did not seem serious in pursuing anything lasting.

But who could she talk to? Marie would only push Cinderella to accept Julien or Marcus. Lady Delattre would be a sympathetic ear, but was unlikely to have any useful advice. Lady Klara would be a source of sound advice, as stiff and proper as she was, but Cinderella had a friendlier relationship with the Colonel than she did with her step-mother.

Who could she approach?

Cinderella shook her head and turned her attention to the books. She was better off pondering her problems at a time less pressing than the present. The Colonel was a rogue, to be sure, but he was controlled enough that he would not do anything dark or dangerous to Cinderella.

She would have to be satisfied with that. For now.

“Mademoiselle?”

Cinderella groaned and covered her head with her arms. It had been a long day. All she wanted to do was doze on her bed. Who cared about dinner?

“Mademoiselle?”

“What is it, Jeanne?”

“Lady Klara requests your presence.”

Cinderella sat up. “What?”

“Lady Klara requests your presence in her private rooms,” Jeanne repeated.

Cinderella slid off her bed. “Did she say why? Did she seem angry?”

“She gave no indication why she needed to see you, Mademoiselle,” Jeanne said as they hurried out of Cinderella’s bedroom.

Curse me, it’s as if my ponderings from yesterday brought her attention to me. What does she want now? Cinderella thought.

When they reached the private parlor situated against Lady Klara’s rooms, they stopped.

Cinderella tried to shake the worst of the wrinkles from her dress and smoothed her short hair into place.

Jeanne curtsied to her before she knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Lady Klara said, her voice its usual tone of ice and snow.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Jeanne opened the door. “Your Ladyship. Mademoiselle Cinderella,” she said, her voice faltering before she curtsied again.

When Cinderella entered the parlor, Jeanne fled, shutting the door behind her.

“You wanted to see me, Step-Mother?” Cinderella asked, performing a curtsy of courtesy.

“Cinderella. I have been told a young soldier from Erlauf has been paying you a particular amount of attention,” Lady Klara said.

“I bet he’s nothing but a common squad soldier,” Silla—the oldest of Cinderella’s two step-sisters—sneered.

Mariska, the younger daughter and the kinder of the two, dropped the book of poetry she was reading on her sister’s foot. “I am sorry, Silla. Did that hurt?”

“You! Why do you protect her? She’s nothing but a—,” Silla started.

Lady Klara shifted in her wooden arm chair, making it creak.

Both of her daughters fell silent.

Lady Klara continued, “I am aware you have turned seventeen, making you eligible for marriage. As a result, I caution you to be careful of whom you choose to associate with—a lesson my daughter would be wise to learn as well.”

“Of course, Step-Mother,” Cinderella said.

“I would not want you to bring shame upon your father’s name, after all,” Lady Klara smirked.

Cinderella dug her chipped fingernails into the palms of her hands. “Yes, Step-Mother,” Cinderella said, her voice shaking.

“That is all. Good night, Cinderella.”

“Good night Step-mother, Silla, Mariska,” Cinderella said, curtsying before she rushed from the room. When she got outside of the poisonous room she leaned against the wall, her shoulders heaving with silent sobs.

How dare she. How dare this Erlauf Widow who hated Papa stand there and use him to judge me!

“I hate them,” Cinderella whispered. “I hate Erlauf.”

Cinderella frowned as she wrestled thin willow branches into place, trying her hand at making a wicker basket. One of the maids left her with a sample basket and pattern as well as several started bases, but Cinderella’s basket was lopsided, and the branch ends poked out like twigs in a bird’s nest.

“Are you trying to make it look like that, or is it supposed to resemble this one?” the Colonel asked, holding up the sample basket.

Cinderella glared at the Colonel. “Don’t you have work to do?” she asked, savagely stabbing the willow in the weaving pattern.

“I’ve made my afternoons clear for most of the week. More time to spend with you,

Pet.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Why not? It’s endearing.”

“It’s improper and implies a closer relationship than we have.”

“Why don’t we fix that?” the Colonel asked, sitting in the shade of the tent with Cinderella. They were positioned behind Aveyron’s market stall, separated from the hustle and bustle by canvas drop cloths and tents.

“Or perhaps we should not,” Cinderella said.

Summer was starting to sweep through Erlauf and its colonies—Trieux included. The temperatures were rising, and all of the spring flowers had bloomed.

Cinderella was grateful for the shade as she tried bending the willow branch and was whacked in the face for her efforts. “It is beyond me how a Colonel can find so much time to waste,” Cinderella muttered.

“It is rare. You and I just happen to be lucky,” the Colonel said.

“I feel so blessed,” Cinderella said through gritted teeth. The branch she tried to ease into place cracked. Cinderella plucked the branch out of the basket. “Blast this thing!”

“What are you making baskets for?” the Colonel asked, picking up one of the started bases.

“We use them in the market stand, and for collecting crops.”

“Yes, but why are you making baskets?”

“Because it is better to attempt to be useful than to sit around like a worthless ornament,” Cinderella said.

“Is that an implication to your resentment of the ban I have placed on your little historical tours?” the Colonel asked, studying the basket pattern.

“I would never say that, sir.”

“It’s Friedrich,” the Colonel said as he selected a willow branch and started weaving it around the base. “And it’s for your safety.”

“You have mentioned that before.”

“And yet you still don’t sound convinced.”

“You were growing tired of history,” Cinderella said, rotating her lopsided basket.

“I was, but my worry is legitimate. If someone makes another attempt against me they will aim to take you down as well,” the Colonel said, comparing his weaving to the sample basket.

“And why would they do that?”

“Because you helped me flee. They think you support me.”

“What is there to support? You were a target because you are a colonel in the Erlauf Army. We have nothing to do with each other.”

“That’s not entirely true,” the Colonel said with a sly smile.



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Cinderella tried to smooth the uneven lumps in her weaving. “Yes, it is,” she firmly said.

“They won’t see it that way. As far as assassins are concerned, keeping them from their target is as good as throwing your lot in with their target. I am a soldier, but you are undefended. I worry about you,” the Colonel said, leaning close enough to Cinderella so he could slide his hand under her chin.

“I thank you for your concern, but I assure it is not necessary,” Cinderella said, inching away from the Colonel.

The Colonel grinned and returned to basket weaving.

Several moments later, the curtain dividing the back of the tent from the front stand was thrown aside.

“Cinderella I heard about—” Marie cut herself off with a gasp. She stared at Cinderella and the Colonel, who were both sitting on the ground, surrounded by baskets. “Oh my,” she said, snapping a fan open to fan herself.

Cinderella considered standing to introduce the Colonel before deciding it would give him too much worth. “Marie, I present to you Colonel Friedrich of the First Regiment in the Dragon Army. Colonel Friedrich, this is Madame Marie Raffin, my dearest friend and long-time companion,” Cinderella said, frowning when she realized the Colonel’s basket was more even and round than hers.

The Colonel stood and set his basket aside to remove his army hat and give Marie a

sweeping bow. “The pleasure is all mine,” he said before taking his spot on the ground again.

“Thank you,” Marie said, uncertain.

“Madame Raffin, your husband is a merchant, is he not?” the Colonel asked, taking Cinderella’s basket from her and passing her his.

Cinderella accepted the exchange and started weaving willow branches into his neater basket as the Colonel set about fixing hers.

“He is. His name is Armel Raffin.”

“I have heard good things of your wares. How is business?” the Colonel asked.

“Well enough,” Marie said, brushing her fan through the air.

“I’ve been trying to convince Cinderella she needs to plant flowers,” the Colonel said.

“Why?” Marie cautiously asked, as if the Colonel were a rabid bear.

“Citizens of Erlauf are enthusiastic about nature, but we are especially amorous of flowers. One could make a fine profit on flowers in this area as it is an untapped market,” the Colonel said, his eyebrows furrowing as he studied the basket pattern.

“It’s the wrong season,” Cinderella said.

“For spring flowers, yes. However, if you planted summer flowers now you would have enough time for them to grow, I should think,” the Colonel said. “Do you want me to visit Aveyron to point out proper places to grow flowers? I’ve been reading up

on the subject.”

“No, thank you, sir,” Cinderella said.

“Friedrich,” the Colonel countered.

“Marie, what brought you to Aveyron’s stand?” Cinderella asked, ignoring the Colonel’s wriggling eyebrows.

“The usual. Werra gossip and such,” Marie said.

When it was obvious the Colonel’s gaze was attached to his basket weaving, Marie flapped her fan and bugged her eyes at Cinderella before jabbing her fan at the Colonel.

Cinderella shrugged and shook her head.

“The weather has been quite nice, hasn’t it?” Marie hastily said when the Colonel glanced up.

“It has. I hope it is just as pleasant in Loire,” Cinderella said.

“Why?” the Colonel blinked.

“For the royal wedding,” Marie said. “Prince Severin has married a merchant’s daughter.”

“Prince Severin? The cursed prince?” the Colonel said.

“Yes. His bride broke the curse, I gather,” Cinderella said. “I imagine their wedding was lovely.”

“Yes, if not slightly unusual,” Marie said.

“What do you mean?” the Colonel asked.

“It is abnormal for a nobleman, much less royalty, in Loire to marry below their station,” Marie said.

“You don’t approve of the union?” the Colonel said.

“I cannot fault the Prince or his lady love, or I would be a hypocrite. However, even I must admit it seems...unusual for the Prince of such a grand country to introduce merchant blood to the line,” Marie said.

The Colonel shrugged. “I forgot, you Trieux folk always modeled yourselves after Loire. It always seemed to me they put on airs. Besides, isn’t Prince Severin illegitimate? For all we know his wife’s blood could be better than his.”

“Friedrich!” Cinderella gasped.

The Colonel smiled in delight, softening the stark black of his eye patch. “Yes?”

Cinderella was aware of her slip-up, but she was still aghast at his terrible manners.

“You may have forgotten but Marie and I are still ladies!”

“Do not worry about it. I will forgive you,” the Colonel soothed.

“You are being indecent,” Cinderella said, bending a willow branch in her anger.

“Very well, then. Strike the second part of my argument and allow me to amend it with this: isn’t marrying the peasant class vogue right now? King Henrik of Arcainia just married a commoner not four weeks ago, or so,” the Colonel said.

“True,” Marie acknowledged.

“And everyone knows Crown Prince Steffen of Arcainia married a commoner. Yes, she has the title of Marquise because she killed the ogre, or troll, or what-have-you who ruled the lands before her, but it wasn’t inherited,” the Colonel said.

“You are correct,” Marie said.

“But you still don’t approve?” the Colonel said.

Marie shrugged. “Truly it is none of my affair. I will always advocate for lovers to follow their hearts.”

“What do you think, Cinderella?” the Colonel asked.

Cinderella stared at the basket in her hands. The Colonel’s beginner but well-constructed base was still intact, but the layers Cinderella added were lopsided and filled with holes. “I think I have no talent for basket weaving.”

The Colonel chuckled as he set his basket aside. “You’ll get better. I’m off. It was good to meet you, Marie Raffin,” he said, standing and bowing to both ladies. “Until next time. Stay safe, Pet,” he said, reaching out to brush Cinderella’s cheek with his hand.

Cinderella leaned out of his range. “Good day to you, sir.”

The Colonel smiled to Marie. “She plays hard to get, but she enjoys it,” he said

before ducking out of the tent to avoid the basket Cinderella threw at him.

“That man,” Cinderella seethed.

Marie twitched the tent divider aside to watch him go. “He’s not what I expected.”

“He’s worse, isn’t he?”

“No,” Marie hesitated. “I think he may be serious about you.”

“What? If that was a joke, it wasn’t very funny, Marie,” Cinderella said, joining Marie to watch Friedrich disappear into the market. Even though he and Cinderella were on good terms, most of the market vendors treated Friedrich with suspicion, whispering behind his back and watching his movements with narrowed eyes.

“I wasn’t jesting.”

“It makes no sense. Why would a colonel want a penniless Trieux noble—the daughter of someone he hated? Besides, you saw him. He is a charmer and a player.”

“Yes,” Marie said. “But how many charmers have you seen sit down and make baskets with those whose hearts they intend to play with?”

Cinderella froze in the middle of stacking baskets.

“What do you think of him?” Marie asked.

“It doesn’t matter what I think of him. He could never afford me,” Cinderella said.

“You don’t know that. He may be rich,” Marie said.

“Everyone knows it is mostly the second and third sons of Erlauf nobility who become officers. He has a high social rank and pocket money enough to live comfortably, but he could not possibly supplement Aveyron’s income,” Cinderella said.

“Does he need to?”

“Do you really mean to say you would rather see me with that Erlauf rat than Julien or Marcus?”

“No. But...”

“But?”

“You smiled. Your smile has been a rare thing these days.”

“It was a sarcastic smile! I find that man to be indecent and barely tolerable. I cannot believe you would even entertain the idea that he would seek to have my hand, and that I would rejoice over it!”

Marie shrugged. “Perhaps you are right.”

“Of course I am right,” Cinderella said.

“But if that is the case, if I were you, I would think about how one would decline the suit of such a high-ranking officer.”

Cinderella looked her friend in the eye. “He isn’t serious, Marie. I am a toy to him.”

“Perhaps, but it would be wise of you to prepare. Just in case,” Marie said.

Cinderella mulishly tucked her chin to her neck, ready to argue her case. The fight deflated her, though, when she remembered the warnings from the market venders that she hadn't heeded. "Alright," she agreed.

"Thank you, Cinderella."

"Of course," Cinderella said, puttering with the baskets.

"Personally, I am surprised. He seems much more likeable than I would have estimated."

"What do you mean, likeable? He acts like a half-daft yokel."

"I thought his defense of Prince Severin and his bride was quite endearing," Marie said, her eyes on the ground.

Cinderella winced at her callous words. Of course Marie—a duke's daughter but the wife of a merchant—would be touched by his actions.

"It was quite honorable of him," Cinderella said. "Now, what really brought you here?"

"Oh, yes. I wanted to talk to you about Colonel Friedrich. I did not think I would get the chance to meet him."

"My apologies for the experience."

Marie laughed. "Cinderella! At the very least, you must admit he makes a better basket than you."

"Thank you for the reminder. I shall have to keep that in mind if I ever decide to



pursue the livelihood of basket weaver.”

“I have the report from General Harbach,” Merrich said, entering Friedrich’s office.

“What report?”

“The one detailing the questioning of your would-be killers—that delightful group of men you ran into with your trollish lady love.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Friedrich ignored the taunt. “And?”

“It’s not good,” Merrich said, tossing the report on Friedrich’s desk before he sat down in an empty chair. “You were strategically targeted.”

Friedrich snorted. “That is hardly a surprise,” he said, paging through the report.

“Yes, but that’s not the bad news.”

“Oh?”

“They weren’t Trieux rebels or advocates,” Merrich said.

“I should think not. Even Trieux citizens would not be so stupid as to murder me with Trieux weapons. It would start another wave of persecution and suspicion. Our government would crack down even harder on them,” Friedrich said, propping his military boots up on a footstool.

“I don’t believe you are taking this seriously enough,” Merrich said.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because if they weren’t Trieux rebels, and no one from Erlauf would hurt a hair on your head, that means we have another enemy out there,” Merrich said.

“The assailants were paid a private contract?” Friedrich frowned, skimming the papers.

“Yes. They met with a handful of contacts in various countries before receiving you as their elimination assignment. It’s all very cloak-and-dagger. What’s most disconcerting is that they were officially hired and dispatched by a dark mage.”

“A mage?”

“One exiled by the Veneno Conclave, yes. Worst yet, she was only a representative. She didn’t write the contract out of personal spite.”

“Whom did she represent?”

Merrich shrugged. “They didn’t know. All they said was that she hired them on behalf of an organization or movement of some sort.”

Friedrich grimly leaned back in his chair. “I don’t like it,” he said. “A month ago our southern border was plagued with wraiths. Last week, a company from the Fifth Regiment took out a giant, and now we hear my assassins were hired by a mage?”

“That’s too much activity from dark magic to be a coincidence,” Merrich said. “We used to get a handful of evil based entity fights per year. Now they happen almost weekly.”

“And yet the parts of Erlauf that used to belong to Trieux remain unscathed,” Friedrich said.

“You think Trieux is somehow involved?”

“No. I think whoever or whatever is doing this is lulling them into a false sense of security. Our troubles are not widely publicized, after all.”

“What do we do?”

Friedrich tapped his fingers on his desk. “I will speak to the Commander. Before we take any serious action, it would be wise to speak to representatives from the Veneno Conclave. We don’t want to step on their toes, after all.”

Merrich nodded. “I will tell Hardbutt.”

Friedrich rolled his eyes. “One day General Harbach will catch you on that, and he will string you up by your tongue.”

Merrich laughed. “Thank you for your concern, but you had best worry about your own neck first. Which reminds me, I saw Diederick earlier today.”

“Oh?”

“He said to tell you if you got yourself killed by assassins he would refuse to allocate funds for a gravestone or coffin.”

Friedrich winced. “Sometimes I wonder how he obtained his high position with his terrible personality.”

Merrich slapped his leg and stood. “He’s good at what he does. But enough of our dreary discussion. Work calls, and I intend to go out tonight. Will you come with? Friedrich?” Merrich asked when his friend didn’t respond.

“Sorry, just thinking,” Friedrich said.

“Of what?”

Friedrich hesitated. “I had decided to take additional precautions regarding Cinderella’s safety, but I don’t think it’s enough. I might need to place more soldiers on guard duty around her as well.”

“That would be wise. You can bet whatever is behind this flux of darkness will aim for her now that you have made your infatuation with her infallibly clear.”

“I don’t think she will warm to the idea of strange men following her around.”

Merrich shrugged. “So introduce her to them. I’m off. Read the report before you talk to the Commander, please,” Merrich said before disappearing through the door.

Friedrich barely noticed his friend’s exit. “Introduce her? Why not? It’s earlier than I wanted them to know of her, but her safety...” Friedrich trailed off. “I’ll do it,” he decided. “It will take some planning, but I will bring Cinderella to the First Regiment.”

## Chapter 6

“This isn’t the way to the library,” Cinderella said as she followed the Colonel down a side street in Werra.

“I know.”

“You said we were going to the library.”

“I did.”

“You said you had an easier way to get into the library.”

“I lied.”

Cinderella stopped walking and folded her arms across her chest.

When the Colonel realized she wasn’t following him anymore, he stopped and

retreated to her side. “It was the only way to get you to leave the stand. I want to introduce you to some of my friends.”

Cinderella narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“I met Marie; I thought it would pleasant if you met some of my men.”

“The soldiers under your command, you mean? Why would I want to meet them?”

The Colonel smirked down at Cinderella. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“I’m going back,” Cinderella said.

“I have a farming book.”

Cinderella stopped and turned around. “What?”

“In my office I have a newly purchased book that details farming and growing techniques. If you come with me, I will give it to you,” the Colonel said, adjusting the brim of his military hat.

Cinderella thought for several seconds. Books were expensive—that was why she was reduced to breaking into the library. With a reference book, Cinderella might not need to perform that illegal activity so often, which would be a blessing. She suspected some of the patrol leaders deduced she was the culprit. Wherever she went, city patrols dogged her steps.

“Alright,” Cinderella agreed.

The Colonel’s smug smile said he knew she would agree to the bargain.

“But if you are taking me somewhere indecent to meet these chums of yours...”

“We’re going to my regiment’s camp. It will be perfectly safe, and your reputation will remain intact,” the Colonel said once again leading the way.

The Colonel’s camp was outside Werra, stationed on parkland previously owned by the Trieux King. What once was a party pavilion was now a mere field washed with burgundy and gray-colored tents.

A battalion of soldiers were practicing with their swords, while a company raced their horses farther out. Men swarmed in and out of the camp, going about their duties and preparing for patrols.

As Cinderella and the Colonel entered the campgrounds, most of the soldiers stopped to gawk.

“Colonel, is this her?”

“Petite little thing, isn’t she?”

“You sure she’s Trieux? I never seen hair like that before.”

Words became indistinguishable as men crowded around Cinderella and the Colonel. They saluted before speaking their mind, shouting to be heard over one another.

The Colonel ignored the buzz, and seized a soldier by his shoulder and dragged him out of the crush. “Is Merrich here?” the Colonel asked.

“No, Sir. Colonel Merrich was called to the palace this morning.”

“Excellent,” the Colonel said with a smile.



Cinderella edged closer to the Colonel as soldiers jostled around her. They remained a respectful distance from her, but there were so many, and they were loud.

The Colonel put an arm around Cinderella's shoulders. "Men, listen up. This is Duchess Lacreux of Aveyron. I want you to treat her with the respect and honor she's due."

Cinderella slithered out of the Colonel's arm, shocked when soldiers started whistling and cat calling.

"The Colonel's got a woman!"

"Never thought I'd see the day the Colonel was tamed."

Cinderella looked at the Colonel, but he was smiling of all things, as if happy with the soldiers' observations.

"That's enough. Get back to work, you lazy slugs," the Colonel said after a few minutes of chatter.

The soldiers departed, gossiping and watching Cinderella and the Colonel with interest.

"Who is Colonel Merrich?" Cinderella asked.

"My goat-footed best friend. You'll meet him, someday," the Colonel said, a pleased smile pasted on his lips as he looked out over his camp.

"Humph," Cinderella said.

"Would you like a tour of the grounds?"

Cinderella self-consciously smoothed her skirts. “Couldn’t we just go to your office?” she asked. She had been so dazzled by the offer of the book she hadn’t thought the situation through. She was marching into the enemy’s camp. These men had killed Trieux soldiers, and under the orders of their queen and her consort, they had killed nobles, too.

The Colonel studied Cinderella before offering his arm—for once acting like a gentleman. “Just a stroll,” he said.

Cinderella reluctantly placed her hand on his arm and allowed the Colonel to lead.

“Our patrol squads leave from this part of the camp. You can see them getting ready for the changeover,” the Colonel said as they neared a field where six organized patrol squads were lined up.

“You use dogs?” Cinderella said, noting the presence of at least one black and brown canine with each squad.

“The dogs were recently put on patrol thanks to our scramble in the ruins. They are skilled at tracking and catching,” the Colonel said. “Gustav, Ivo.”

Two men from two different squads jogged up to the Colonel. A dog trotted along with each man.

“Colonel,” they said in a chorus, saluting him.

“Please introduce your fine companions to Lady Lacreux,” the Colonel said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

“Lady,” both soldiers said, bobbing forward in bows.

“This here is Valor,” one of the soldiers—the younger one with mud-brown hair—said, crouching next to his black and brown dog. The dog’s triangular ears flicked when it heard its name. “She’s been my partner for two years. She’s got the heart of a lion and is a fine lady,” he said, petting the dog.

The dog’s tail thumped on the ground, and she looked up at the soldier with a dog smile before fixing her brown eyes on Cinderella. Her tail wagged more as she looked hopeful, her body quivering in her desire to be petted.

“She’s still a little young,” her handler said.

“Just like you,” the other soldier muttered.

The Colonel pet Valor, briefly inspecting her ears and teeth before running his hands down her body. “You’ve taken good care of her,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” the soldier saluted.

Valor, egged on by the Colonel’s attention, went so far as to nudge Cinderella’s hand. Cinderella stroked the dog’s body. The large canine leaned into her, her curly tail flapping like crazy.

“And who is your fine looking companion, Ivo?” the Colonel asked, turning to the second soldier—an older, grizzled man.

“This is Mammoth,” the soldier, Ivo, said.

“How long have you had Mammoth?” Cinderella asked, studying Ivo’s large dog.

“Almost eight years, Your Ladyship,” Ivo said, tipping the brim of his hat to Cinderella.

Mammoth was more controlled than Valor, and made a point to keep his attention hinged on Ivo—as if disgusted by Valor’s eagerness.

“Mammoth, greet the lady properly,” Ivo said.

To Cinderella’s surprise and delight Mammoth slid forward on his front paws, bowing to Cinderella.

“That’s a boy,” Ivo gruffly said, placing his hand on Mammoth’s head.

“Thank you, soldiers,” the Colonel said.

Sensing the dismissal, Gustav and Ivo saluted the Colonel, bowed to Cinderella, and headed back to their positions. Their dogs followed them, although Valor shook her tail at Cinderella a few times before she hurried after her handler.

Cinderella and the Colonel left the outpost and moved on to a wooden structure. Builders swarmed around it, climbing the roof and nailing shingles in place. “This is the mess hall, or what passes for one as they finish building it,” the Colonel said.

The building held an assortment of empty tables, two masonry ovens, an earth oven, and a fleet of men and women.

The Colonel led Cinderella to swarming cooks and their hot ovens located in the back

of the building. “Berta is the lord and ruler of the kitchens. We’re fed only because of her diligence. Berta, come meet my lady love, Lady Lacreux.”

Berta—a large, red-faced woman—wiped her hands on her apron. “So you’ve finally been bested, eh, Sir?” the woman laughed. “You must be quite the woman to tangle with the Colonel. Welcome to the First Regiment,” Berta said to Cinderella.

“Thank you,” Cinderella said, aware of all the other cooks and kitchen help staring at her.

Berta turned around and bellowed. “What are you gawking at like a bunch of turkeys? Get back to cookin’ ‘n have the decency not to gossip of the Colonel’s Woman in front of her!”

“Thank you, Berta,” the Colonel wryly said.

“They’re a talkative lot, but they know the kitchens,” Berta said. “Just finished baking my famous molasses bread. Want a piece, Colonel?” Berta asked, waddling over to a wooden table to hack at a dark brown loaf of bread without waiting for a reply. “What about you, Lady? You’re all skin and bones. You could use some fattening,” she said, cutting a second piece.

She slathered both pieces with butter before presenting them to Cinderella and the Colonel.

“There. Don’t that hit the spot?” Berta asked.

Cinderella took a bite out of the bread. “Fantastic,” she said.

“I would join the Army again just to eat your food, Berta,” the Colonel said.

Berta's ruddy face turned a darker shade of red. "Colonel," she said, sketching a tipsy curtsy.

"We'll get out of the way. Thank you, Berta," the Colonel said.

Berta dipped a second curtsy and waddled back to her minions. "Stoke the fire, and get those dishes washed!" she roared as Cinderella and the Colonel left the mess hall.

The Colonel led Cinderella through the grounds, waving and acknowledging his men, who watched them with ill-disguised interest.

Cinderella was relieved when the Colonel led the way into a plain but solid building. "This is the regiment's headquarters. Any visiting colonels stay here, but it's mostly living quarters and offices for me, the general I serve, and the officers below us.

"I see," Cinderella said, following the Colonel through the building.

"Kurt! Kurt, where—oh," the Colonel said when a huge, hulking soldier stepped out of the shadows in front of him.

"This is Ensign Kurt Werlauf. Ensign, Lady Lacreux," the Colonel said.

"Good afternoon, Ensign," Cinderella said.

Kurt-the-giant bowed.

“Kurt isn’t much for talking, but he’s a fantastic soldier. He carries my flag for me—though he’s sorely overqualified and should be a rank or two above that,” the Colonel said, slapping Kurt on the shoulder. “Kurt, please escort Lady Lacreux to my office.”

“The book—” Cinderella started.

“Is waiting for you on my desk. I’ll be along in a minute, although I shall miss you every second we are apart,” the Colonel said, clasping Cinderella’s hands.

“I would have thought you wouldn’t act so silly in front of your men,” Cinderella said plucking her hands from the Colonel’s grasp.

“Where would be the fun in that, Pet?”

Cinderella waggled her hand at him. “Be gone. I want my book.”

“As you wish, Dearest,” the Colonel said before he headed up the hallway.

Ensign Kurt led Cinderella in the opposite direction, the wooden floor boards creaking under his massive girth. He stopped outside a wooden door and opened it, revealing Colonel Friedrich’s office.

It was stuffed with books, scrolls, maps, and papers. The walls were lined with bookshelves, a full scale model of Trieux and Erlauf was nestled into the window

seat, and the fireplace was clean and empty.

Writing utensils, sticks of wax, and bottles of ink were everywhere. There were two chairs in the room besides the Colonel's stationed behind his desk, but they were the only bare surfaces in the room.

Ensign Kurt bowed to Cinderella before he stepped out of the office and shut the door behind him.

Cinderella approached the Colonel's desk with trepidation. "How am I supposed to find my book in this mess?" Cinderella muttered.

There were army accounts, activity reports, and patrol timetables stacked together. Cinderella tried to turn a blind eye to them as she shifted papers. She finally found a book near the bottom of the paper mess. It was bound leather, dyed blue, and titled: *The Growing and Harvesting of Flowers*.

Cinderella wouldn't have thought it was her book, but there was a scrap of paper poking out of it that read "Cinderella." Plus, the Colonel was insistent she try growing flowers. It was no surprise he mislead her about the book's subject.

"Still, a book is a book. If it is useless I can sell it," Cinderella said, flipping through the volume before seating herself in one of the free chairs.

The book had helpful drawings of various flowers, gave detailed planting instructions, the desired conditions, the necessary types of soils, and more. Cinderella read enough to conclude she should hold onto it—in case she did ever venture into the flower selling market—before she realized she had been left alone for some time.

Cinderella opened the door, earning herself a nice view of Ensign Kurt's broad back. "Excuse me, where is the Colonel?" Cinderella asked when the ensign turned around.



Ensign Kurt blinked at her.

“The Colonel, Colonel Friedrich?” Cinderella repeated.

Ensign Kurt bowed and started down the hallway. His great thudding steps made the floor shake.

Cinderella ducked back in the office. She plopped down in the chair and studied the office some more.

Judging by the building, it seemed the Colonel’s regiment was settling in for the long haul. Like the Colonel’s office, the building layout was simple, but comfortable. In the hallway, there were maps on the walls and rugs on the floors, and in the Colonel’s office, the glass windows had storm shutters fastened to them.

The Army was planning to stay in Werra. Probably permanently.

Cinderella wasn’t sure how she felt about it.

“Thinking of me?” the Colonel said, stepping into his office.

“Hardly,” Cinderella said.

“Ensign Kurt tells me you called me by my name,” the Colonel said, smirking.

“I called you Colonel Friedrich,” Cinderella protested.

“Close enough.”

“Not at all.”

“It’s only a matter of time before you cut the title,” the Colonel said.

“We shall see.”

“So, what do you think?” the Colonel asked as he opened his window—the only real luxury of the room.

“About?”

The Colonel gestured outside, where a company of soldiers practiced mounted maneuvers. “Of them. Of my men. Are they not what you expected?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you think of the Erlauf Army, I can only guess you picture a mindless hoard of barbarians who kill and slaughter.”

Cinderella tapped a foot on the floor. “Was that why you paraded me through here? To show me they’re still men? That they talk and laugh just like everyone else?”

“Perhaps,” the Colonel said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Cinderella joined the Colonel at the window. Before meeting the Colonel, it was easy to paint a negative portrait of Erlauf soldiers...but somewhere between helping her break into the library and basket-weaving, Cinderella's view of the Colonel had altered.

Similarly, it would be easy to look at the soldiers and wonder how many Trieux men they had slain, but it was also easy to see how they were like any other human being.

"Nobody wins in war. At least, that was what my Father said," Cinderella said.

"I agree," the Colonel said.

Cinderella looked to the Colonel, surprised he should feel the same. Even Cinderella wasn't entirely sure what her Father meant by the phrase. The Colonel's voice was coated with something. Cinderella couldn't quite identify it, but it sounded like wistfulness. "But it doesn't mean Trieux wasn't wronged in the takeover," she said.

"I suppose you are referring to the taxes?"

"The taxes, the slaughter, the exiles, the new laws. If you meant to show me your soldiers are human too, you have succeeded and softened me some. But you have done nothing to convince me your Erlauf Royalty are anything but brutes," Cinderella said.

The Colonel coughed. "Of course," he said.

There were a few moments of awkward silence before Cinderella remembered

herself. “Thank you for the book—although the content was not what I thought it would be.”

The Colonel grinned. “I managed to fool you, did I? You’re welcome. I hope you can use it. I have something else for you.”

Cinderella blinked. “Oh?”

The Colonel rolled his eye as he pulled something from a pocket in his jacket. “It is not a book or something for you to sell—you are a merchant at heart, do you know that?”

“What is it?” Cinderella asked, ignoring the teasing.

“Before I give it to you, you must promise you will wear it always.”

Cinderella suspiciously eyed the Colonel. “What?”

“It is a necklace, a token of my affections,” he said, ignoring Cinderella’s huff of disbelief. “You must wear it, all the time. If you don’t wear it around your neck, I want it tucked in your skirts or something.”

“Friedrich,” Cinderella said, shocked by his words.

“I am not joking, Cinderella. You must wear this,” the Colonel said, his dark eye weighing on Cinderella like a draft horse stepping on a blade of grass.

Curious, Cinderella sighed. “As you wish.”

The Colonel passed over the necklace, which was a simple design of a flying dragon hanging from a chain. The craftsmanship was splendid, but it did not look particularly

costly. Perhaps it was a way his men could identify her? Cinderella wouldn't put it past the Colonel to soak the necklace in some sort of oil the patrol dogs could easily sniff out.

"Thank you," Cinderella said, taking the necklace. "It's very kind of you."

The Colonel watched her expectantly, and Cinderella hesitated. The dragon was clearly styled to resemble the royal Erlauf crest—which was also a flying dragon. Hanging such a symbol from her neck felt almost traitorous.

Cinderella looked back at the Colonel. "You said I have to wear it?" she asked.

The corners of the Colonel's mouth briefly turned down. "I thought you might balk," he said. "If you find it unbearable, carrying it on your person will do well enough."

Cinderella studied the Colonel, who rewarded her with a wry smile.

Cinderella had saved his life, and the Colonel had very likely saved hers by taking down the assassin—however little she liked to think of it.

Cinderella looked down at the dragon and briefly clenched it in her hand. Like it or not, he had become a strange sort of friend or companion, in spite of his heritage.

"If it's so important to you..." Cinderella trailed off as she fastened the necklace around her neck. It was long and dipped under her dress, hiding the dragon from eyesight.

"It is. Thank you," the Colonel said, his smile turning bright.

Cinderella fiddled with the necklace and her pricey book. "I should go," she said, feeling awkward.

“Yes,” the Colonel agreed.

Cinderella arched a scarlet-red eyebrow. “So eager to get rid of me? How unusual.”

“Not at all. My General and Colonel Merrich-the-goat-foot will be back soon. I would rather avoid you meeting them right now.”

“You feel I will embarrass you?”

“No, it is quite the reverse. I fear they will embarrass me.”

“Oh?” Cinderella asked.

“Darn it, now I’ve intrigued you. Please allow me to assure you my General is a force of nature you would rather not meet right now.”

“And this Merrich you’ve mentioned?”

“Let’s just say I’m the jealous type.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Come along. We can stop at the stables on our way out.”

“As you wish.”

“Thank you.”

Chapter 7

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Cinderella was in her room—studying the two good dresses she still owned. The Delattres recently sent her a dinner invitation for the following week. As these were advance invitations, it was likely to be a more formal event, and all remaining Trieux nobility were invited. Cinderella would have to make a greater effort to look presentable according to Trieux standards.

“I think I will grow too hot in my winter dress, but my summer dress...,” Cinderella trailed off and brushed the silk skirts. Both dresses were simple—Cinderella sold her more lavish dresses out of practicality—but Cinderella was reluctant to wear her remaining summer dress as it was the last gift she had received from her father.

Cinderella sighed and turned her back to the nearly empty wardrobe.

Her thoughts were interrupted by three timid knocks on the door.

“Come in,” Cinderella said.

“Mademoiselle,” Jeanne curtsied after she opened the door. “There is an Erlauf man here to see you.”

“An army officer?”

“No. A government official.”

Cinderella sucked a breath of air in and placed a hand on her stomach, as if to hold it in place. Erlauf officials were never a good thing. “Thank you, Jeanne. I will see him now. He is still in the main entrance?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you,” Cinderella said, dread filling her as she made her way to the entrance.

What could they want? They publically post tax law changes. We paid last season’s taxes. Did we not renew our stall license for the market stand? Cinderella’s mind crawled with possible problems and worst-case scenarios. She was stiff with worry by the time she greeted the Erlauf Official.

“I am Duchess Cinderella Lacreux. You asked to see me?” Cinderella asked.

The official raised his eyebrows at Cinderella’s appearance—shorn hair and servant-length skirts—before he extended a stack of papers. “I was sent by Queen Freja to address your unpaid fines.”

“What?” Cinderella said, plucking the papers from his grasp.

“After the war, Aveyron failed to pay several of the landholding fines. As half of them were paid off, the Crown assumed the rest would be forthcoming, but was never compensated. The interest has accrued quite steeply.”

“I don’t understand. I was never told of landholding fines,” Cinderella said.

“It was a one-time amount placed on nobles newly adopted into Erlauf,” the official said.

That’s a fancy way of saying only Trieux nobles had to pay this, Cinderella thought.

“But I never heard of this, I never received any notice of it, nor of the compounding interest.”



“I believe the Lord of Aveyron at the time of the fine was Eugene Lacreux. It was his failure to pay off all the fees, but as you inherited his estate, you inherited his debt as well.”

“My father knew about this?” Cinderella said.

The official indicated the papers Cinderella held.

Cinderella flipped through them, taking note of the dates and the signatures. Her Father’s signature was scrawled on some of the paperwork, indicating he acknowledged the fine. The dates all matched up—the fines were from when her Father still breathed.

Why didn’t he just pay them?

“What is the total?” Cinderella asked.

The Erlauf official took the papers from Cinderella and flipped through them. He pointed to a figure on the second to last page.

“What?” Cinderella said. “This cannot be right. That’s half the yearly income Aveyron makes before taxes and expenses are calculated. We cannot pay this on top of our usual tax burden.”

“Should you be unable to pay the fine, the Crown will seize Aveyron itself as payment.”

Cinderella gaped in shock.

“The Crown expects the majority of the debt to be paid off by the end of summer. Do you understand?”

Cinderella nodded.

“That concludes our business. Good afternoon, Lady Lacreux,” the official said. He bowed at the waist and left the chateau.

Alone, Cinderella sank to her knees.

This was it. She was going to lose Aveyron, and fail in her duty to Aveyron’s servants and tenants. There was no way Cinderella could pay off the debt. She could have limped by, paying off the initial fine, but the debt had accrued so much the number was a mountain she couldn’t overcome.

What was Father thinking? Cinderella wondered. What do I do? What do I tell everyone?

“Cinderella? I hope you have a reason for slumping on the filthy floor like a common beggar,” an icy cold voice said. It was Lady Klara.

Cinderella opened her mouth several times before she was able to speak. “Good afternoon, Step-Mother.”

“What did the official want?”

Cinderella plucked the paper out of the packet that detailed the fines and interest due. She handed it up to her Step-mother, too weak to stand.

Lady Klara took it and started reading.

A sliver of hope resonated in Cinderella. Perhaps her Step-Mother would finally be moved to financially help Aveyron?

“You will marry and sell Aveyron?”

“What?” Cinderella said, her lips stiff.

“Your only other option is to entirely lose Aveyron. At least with marriage you will not find yourself penniless.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Her hopes crushed, Cinderella stared at the ground, her hands clamped into fists.

“It does not matter to me what you choose to do. I will look into alternate housing for my daughters and me. Please tell me when you have made your decision,” Lady Klara said, extending the paper to Cinderella.

When Cinderella didn’t take it, Lady Klara dropped it and walked away, her steps echoing in the empty chamber.

A door opened and closed, and Cinderella’s shoulders shook with rage and misery.

Cinderella roared and picked up the papers. She flung them across the room before she slumped forward and pounded the floor with her fists.

This was it. After everything she had done, she would still lose Aveyron.

This was the end.

“You look terrible.”

Cinderella closed her eyes. She couldn’t deal with him right now. “Go away, Friedrich.”

“Oh no. You just used my name. This calls for a celebration,” the Colonel said, plopping down in the dirt next to Cinderella.

Cinderella was huddled against a fountain in the public gardens. It was early in the

day, so the gardens were empty, but there were still patrolling soldiers around to ignore Cinderella's tears and keep her safe.

"How did you know I was here?" Cinderella asked, covering her swollen, red-rimmed eyes with her hands.

"Several soldiers reported to me that my darling Pet was sobbing her eyes out in the gardens."

"Could you stop with the jokes? You might be enjoying yourself, but this isn't funny. If you're just going to call me silly names would you please leave?"

The Colonel peeled Cinderella's hands away from her eyes. "Cinderella, what's wrong?" he asked in a gentle voice.

"I've lost," Cinderella said in a broken whisper. "Aveyron is as good as gone."

"How?"

"There were fines. I didn't know about them. They were from directly after the takeover, when my father still...They're so big now I cannot possibly pay them as well as taxes."

"Can't you sell any land, or layoff servants?"

"No," Cinderella said. "I cannot let any of the staff members go, and the only reason Aveyron survives as it has is because of all the farm land and grazing land."

"But if you lose Aveyron, all of your servants will be lost as well."

"Aveyron isn't what's important. It's the servants. Choosing whom to abandon and

let go—I can't do it.”

“So what will you do?”

“Either I lose Aveyron to the crown at the end of this summer, or I sell it. Unless I want to be penniless and homeless, I will have to marry,” Cinderella said, tipping her head back to stare at the blue sky. It seemed wrong that the weather could be so delightful as Cinderella's world fell apart.

“So marry me.”

“What?”

“Marry me,” Friedrich repeated.

“You must be out of your mind,” Cinderella said.

“No.”

“Then you are joking.”

“I'm not.”

“What could possibly move you to want to marry someone from Trieux?”

“Love?”

“HAH!”

“Aren't you jaded,” Friedrich said, adjusting his black patch.

“You’re not in love with me. You aren’t even hurt by my refusal.”

“I’m very hurt. Deep inside my heart is crying,” Friedrich said.

Cinderella snorted.

“And although you might fight it, you’re considered an Erlauf citizen.”

“That does nothing to change my situation.”

“I know; I just wanted to be sure you knew. But you’ve gotten me off track. Cinderella Lacreux, please marry me,” Friedrich said. He picked up one of Cinderella’s hands and grazed her knuckles with his lips.

“Friedrich, I’m going to have a mountain of debt on me. You could not possibly pay it off.”

“Perhaps I can’t pay it off, but I have other resources,” Friedrich said.

Cinderella shook her head. “No. I can’t. Unless you can afford to pay this amount as a bride price, my answer is no.” Cinderella said, digging the crumpled paper that listed the amounts Aveyron owed out of her apron pocket.

Friedrich smoothed the paper and whistled. “I hope your servants are worth it.”

“They’re all I have.”

“Well. If I get this amount and present it to you, you’ll marry?”

“If you have it before the summer is over, yes,” Cinderella said.

“Right. Can I keep this?”

“If you want,” Cinderella said, massaging her temples.

“In the meantime, I have something that might bring you a smile,” Friedrich said, shifting so he could unhook a pouch from his belt.

“I cannot possibly take another gift. You’ve already given me more than I can repay you.”

“Then consider it not a gift, but a reward for wearing the necklace,” Friedrich said, nodding at the bit of chain that was visible on the back of Cinderella’s neck before he passed the pouch over.

She opened the bag and peered inside. “Seeds?”



“Flower seeds.”

On a normal day, Cinderella would hate Friedrich for once again being so free and careless with great amounts of money—signifying his financial wealth, or at the very least independence—but instead Cinderella eyed the seeds with new appreciation. Planting flowers might be grasping at straws, but it was better than waiting for the inevitable. “What kind?”

“Sun Skips.”

“I haven’t heard of them,” Cinderella said, swiveling to look in the direction of the library.

“They’re in the book I gave you, you criminally-minded mademoiselle.”

“Oh. Thank you,” Cinderella said. “This looks like a lot of seeds.”

“It’s enough for a field. They’re blasted costly to purchase, so I suggest you save the seeds from your flowers when they die. You could plant some next year and sell the rest,” Friedrich said.

“If they’re ‘blasted costly’ how did you get them?” Cinderella asked, eyeing Friedrich.

“Through legal methods. It’s not like you are in a position to look down on me, Lady Break-and-Enter,” Friedrich said, tweaking the tip of Cinderella’s button nose.

Cinderella laughed. “Thank you, Friedrich,” she said, grateful to be amused even as her world fell apart.

“For marrying you?”

Cinderella rolled her eyes. “For the seeds. For coming,” she said before she stood up and dusted off her dress. She held the pouch of seeds up to the sky. “It’s too early to give up hope. I forgot that. Thank you,” she said, smiling down at the officer.

Friedrich tilted his head. “Does this mean you’ll forgive our lovely queen, her wonderful husband, and her charming sons?”

“Hardly,” Cinderella sourly said.

“I thought as much, but it was worth a try,” Friedrich said as he, too, stood.

He leaned closer and closer to Cinderella, lowering his face towards hers. When he was a hand’s width away, Cinderella asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to kiss you.”

In an instant, Cinderella had both her hands clamped over his lips. “No, you aren’t.”

Friedrich sighed, his breath warm against Cinderella’s hands. “Why not? Don’t I deserve it?”

“Kissing is not a matter of deserving.”

“Then what is it?”

“It is an easy way to express affection.”

“I should have known you would scorn the easy way. You enjoy making things difficult. What’s so bad about the easy way?”

“I find it unimaginative, not to mention disloyal to my future.”

“Future?”

“I don’t know whom my husband will be until the proposal is accepted and the wedding date is picked. A million things could happen before the offer. It has been expected of me to marry Julien Rosseux since my father died. My body is the one thing I truly have to barter with now that Aveyron is swimming in debt. I suspect I’m worth more as long as I remain untouched.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think of it. If I were to marry you, how would you feel knowing I kissed Julien a great deal?”

Friedrich was silent.

“And there you have it. Physical affection, for me, is a matter of loyalty and wealth. I will fight for my future, even if I don’t know whom it involves,” Cinderella said, clasping her hands behind her back before she started walking.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the market.”

“You’re just going to leave me?”

“Now that I feel better, I have things to do.”

Friedrich muttered about headstrong females as he squinted up at the sun.

“Friedrich.”

“What?” he grumbled.

“Thank you,” Cinderella said. She smiled, a gesture that transformed her already pretty features into a vision of gentleness and beauty. “Thank you for coming, and thank you for cheering me up.”

Friedrich dumbly nodded “Until tomorrow,” Cinderella said.

“Until tomorrow, my love!” Friedrich called.

“Don’t push your luck.”

“If I didn’t, I’d be ashamed of myself,” Friedrich shouted as Cinderella left the gardens, a smile on her face and a spring in her steps.

## Chapter 8

Cinderella was the last to arrive to the Delattres’ dinner party. She wore her beloved summer dress—a creation of lavender silk that brought out the stark gray of her eyes and the vivid red hue of her hair.

It was a day costume, so Cinderella was woefully underdressed, but at least she was more presentable than usual. She even had a clean, black shawl she wore for the walk to the manor. As she handed it off to a servant, someone called out for her.

“Cinderella!”

“Marcus,” Cinderella said with a smile. “My, you’ve grown taller since we last met.”

Marcus was all laughter and smiles. “I’m taller than Mama, and I’m nearly taller than you too, I think.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

“I think so as well,” Cinderella said, slowly walking in the direction of the sitting room. “Did only you accompany your parents, or are your little brother and sister present as well?”

“It’s just me. The littles wanted to come, but Father said they’re too young.” Marcus said before remembered himself and offered his arm to Cinderella, which she took. “Everyone else is already here.”

“The Feautres, the Leroys, and the Rosseuxes?”

“Yes.”

“Which of their children did they bring?”

“The Leroys arrived with one of their sons and daughters-in-law. No grandchildren, blessings be said and repeated,” Marcus said, wiping his forehead with great exaggeration. “The Rosseuxes brought Julien, of course, but not Cerise, which is a shame. She has this ear-piercing whistle she said she would teach me—ah,” Marcus broke off and cleared his throat. “The Feautres arrived shortly after we did. Their daughters are with them,” Marcus scowled.

“All of them?” Cinderella asked in surprise.

“No, just the two oldest,” Marcus said, his scowl deepening as they stood just outside the salon.

Cinderella smiled fondly at the young nobleman. He was doing his best to act mature

for her sake, but he was barely fourteen, and as squirrely as a puppy. Cinderella patted Marcus' arm. "You are spending the night?"

"Yes."

"If you have time, tomorrow please stop by Aveyron," Cinderella said.

Marcus dropped his young enthusiasm. "Oh?" he said.

Amused, Cinderella inclined her head to the younger boy. "One of the sheep dogs had a litter of puppies four weeks ago. I thought you might enjoy playing with them while your parents have tea or refreshments with the Delattres. I will not likely be around to show you the puppies, but any of Aveyron's staff members can direct you to them."

Cinderella was rewarded with a brilliant smile from Marcus. He kept it intact as they entered the salon, still arm in arm.

Their entrance did not go unnoticed. Julien Rosseux stood and bowed to Cinderella, his eyes flicking between her and Marcus.

Lady Leroy said with loud horror, "Lady Lacreux, what happened to you?"

As Marcus hadn't said anything, or even seemed to notice, Cinderella hoped her short hair would pass the observation of the nobles who hadn't yet seen it. Apparently she was too optimistic. "I beg your pardon?" Cinderella said.

"Your hair," Lady Leroy said, aghast.

Lord Leroy held up a pair of eyeglasses to his eyes. "Eh?" he said.

Cinderella ruefully ran a hand through her shorter locks. "Ah, yes. I had it cut,"

Cinderella said.

“Shorn is closer to the truth,” Lady Feautre said, her voice tight and hateful.

“I think its jolly,” Marcus said, impudent and quick to defend Cinderella. “I can’t imagine how hot you ladies are in the summer with the sun and heat.”

“Marcus,” Lady Girard warned.

Marcus grunted in impatience, but bowed to Cinderella before he left her to stand beside his mother at the fireplace.

“It is a cut unfit for a lady of nobility,” Lady Feautre said.

“It is quite unseemly,” Rosette, the Feautres’ second daughter, said. She widened her china doll blue eyes as she stared at Cinderella. She sat with her sister, Violette, on a settee.

Violette was kinder than her mother and her sister, but she was a mousy, quiet thing. She gave Cinderella a scared look but said not a word.

“Now, now. Let us not be unkind to Lady Lacreux,” Lady Delattre said.

“It is not unkind to note what she takes no pains to hide,” Lady Feautre said.

“What?” Lord Leroy loudly asked, his gray mustache quivering as he leaned forward.

“Cinderella has cut her hair,” Lady Leroy shouted into her husband’s ear.

“Ah, yes. Lady Lacreux does have bright red hair,” Lord Leroy nodded.



“Shameful,” Lady Feautre murmured.

“Lady Lacreux looks divine no matter the state of her hair,” Julien said, bowing over Cinderella’s hand.

“Thank you, Julien,” Cinderella said.

Lady Feautre rolled her eyes and huffed.

“Now that we have all arrived, shall we proceed with dinner?” Lord Delattre said, diverting the topic.

“It’s about time,” Lord Rosseux muttered.

“Please sit where your name card has been placed,” Lady Delattre said as she took her husband’s arm and led the way to the dining hall.

Julien accompanied Cinderella. The pair was silent as they followed their hosts, and it came as no surprise to either of them that they sat together with Marcus on Cinderella’s other side.

“Say, Julien, where is Cerise?” Marcus asked as he sat down.

“She claimed she had a headache this evening and asked to remain home,” Julien said, holding Cinderella’s chair out for her.

“Faked,” Marcus muttered under his breath. “Talk about unfair.”

“I beg your pardon, I couldn’t hear that. What did you say?” Julien asked as he slid Cinderella’s chair in for her as she sat.

“Nothing,” Marcus cheerfully said.

“Is it really proper for Cinderella to sit between the only eligible men in the room, without a chaperon?” Lady Feautre said, a scowl etched upon her handsome face as she stared down the table like a hawk.

“What?” Lord Leroy asked after he seated his wife and took his place next to Lady Feautre.

“Cinderella. She is not chaperoned,” Lady Feautre said, gesturing to Cinderella.

“Pish-posh. What could happen at dinner?” Lord Leroy said before he winked at Cinderella.

“Favoritism runs rampant in this part of the country,” Lady Feautre said with a sniff to her husband.

The man, henpecked as he was, barely managed a shrug.

“Jealousy is quite the look on Lady Feautre,” Marcus whispered to Cinderella.

“Marcus,” Cinderella chided.

The younger boy grinned, unrepentant.

“What is so funny, Marcus? Do share,” Rosette said, jostling the table.

“Nothing,” Marcus said.

“The dreadful Queen Freja has been blessedly silent the past month,” Lord Girard said. “I almost have hopes she will forget to raise taxes come the harvest season.”

“It is still plenty early. She is a miser who will not overlook her grudge against us,” Lord Rosseux snorted.

“She cannot hope to tax us much more,” Lady Delattre said.

“Never underestimate the greed of Erlauf,” Lord Rosseux said as servants placed trays of food on the table.

“I was told a delegate from the Veneno Conclave will meet with their majesties over the summer. Perhaps they mean to discuss Erlauf’s conduct?” Lady Girard said.

“Unlikely,” Lord Leroy’s son said. “The Veneno Conclave takes great pains to stay out of government and country debates, lest they be accused of siding with someone or using magic to aid one country over another.”

“If we were smart, we would have bought an estate in Loire the moment Erlauf camped in Werra,” Lord Girard said.

“Why should I leave my country and my land because of some Erlauf upstart?” Lord Rosseux asked.

“Erlauf has more military power than Trieux could ever hope to muster,” Lord Delattre said. “That was why we six, now five I suppose, voted as we did.”

“This is so. Which is why it would have been best to flee Erlauf’s grasp altogether. They wouldn’t dare bother us in Loire’s borders. Loire is still the biggest, most

influential country,” Lord Girard said.

“Hear, hear,” Lady Leroy said.

“Perhaps,” Julien said. “But they lost some of their opulence when they bowed to Arcainia.”

“Loire, bow to Arcainia? That peasant-infested place? Pah,” Lord Rosseux said. “What nonsense have you been filling your mind with, boy?”

Julien slumped under his father’s criticism, but said, “They had proof the princes of Arcainia dispatched Verglas assassins to kill His Highness Prince Severin. Instead of taking action, they solidified ties with Arcainia.”

“This is true; you cannot deny the nearly perfect Loire lost some of its splendor through that trial,” Lord Leroy’s son said.

“Rumor has it, Arcainia has an edge in the global marketplace on exports and agriculture ventures,” Lord Girard said.

“Farming! Such things are for the common class to worry over, not nobility,” Lady Feautre said. “As members of the peerage, we should be more concerned with preserving our bloodlines, lest the Erlauf commoners try to take our daughters, too,” she said, casting a look at Violette and Rosette.

“Do not worry about us, Mama. We know better than to associate with that kind,” Rosette said.

“Yes, I raised you to be above that,” Lady Feautre said. “But it is not just my girls I worry for. Cinderella, I have heard you spend much of your time with an Erlauf Soldier.”

Cinderella kept her expression pleasant. "I have become acquainted with an Erlauf Colonel, yes."

"Why ever would you want to make such an acquaintance?" Lady Leroy said, holding a hand to her impressive bosom.

"I wasn't given a choice. He is quite persistent," Cinderella said, sipping her wine.

"This is what happens when one forgets one's place and scuttles about, doing work and things beneath them," Lord Rosseux said.

"Cinderella can't help that someone from Erlauf bothers her because she's beautiful," Marcus frowned.

Lord Girard hastily cleared his throat. "What Marcus means to say is Lady Lacreux should not be held responsible for the poor conduct of those from Erlauf."

"Yes," Lady Girard said, scowling at her son.

Marcus guilty locked his gaze on his food and started eating.

"You should report him for bothering you, dear," Lady Delattre said. "It is not right that he shadows you."

"The Colonel has been respectful. I find little fault in his conduct," Cinderella said.

"A likely story, I'm sure," Lady Feautre said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Cinderella set her fork down. “Are you accusing me of lying, Lady Feautre?”

“No, of course not, Lady Lacreux. It is only that I was told the soldier hangs about you every day. If he is not being disrespectful, then perhaps you encourage him? Unknowingly so, I suppose,” Lady Feautre said.

“Eh?” Lord Leroy said.

“Lady Lacreux is engaging the enemy,” Lady Leroy told her husband.

“You must have misheard, Lady Feautre. Cinderella would not do something so reprehensible,” Lady Delattre said.

“Indeed, I should hope not,” Lord Rosseux said, glancing down the table to Cinderella and his son. “Not as long as she’s in the position she’s in.”

“It would be shameful to her station and the rest of us,” Rosette said. “Why, think of what those from Erlauf might conclude? They would imagine us to be an easy bunch who will associate with them.”

“You must do something, Lady Lacreux,” Lady Leroy urged. “You have your title and family name to think of.”

“It may be already in disrepair from your actions, but you should at least salvage your reputation, for the sake of whatever family you marry into,” Lady Feautre said, her jealousy showing as she stared hard at Julien and Marcus sitting on either side of Cinderella before looking to her girls. “Don’t you think so, Lady Rosseux?”

“Perhaps,” the quiet lady murmured.

Angered that her fellow nobles, her allies, would set her out like this and judge her, Cinderella narrowed her eyes in a show of resentment “If you must know the reason for Colonel Friedrich’s visits, it is because I was caught up in an assassination attempt and nearly killed,” she said. There was no need to tell them the assassination was meant for Friedrich. It would get them railing against her again. “He visits out of concern for my welfare. I find the gesture to be noble, especially when one takes our differences into consideration. Furthermore, you have no right to judge my interactions with the Colonel. While he does not always act as a gentleman, he has consistently treated me with respect and bows to my wishes and sense of decorum—something I cannot say for everyone present.”

“Well!” Lady Leroy huffed.

“A weather mage stopped through Werra, not four days ago. I spoke with him, and he thought the summer would be balmy but wet,” Lord Delattre said, trying to change the topic.

“Oh? Isn’t that weather good for crops?” Lord Girard said, eagerly grasping the new topic.

Lady Feautre, however, wasn’t finished. “This is what happens when one lets young children run amok with no chaperone: moral ruin.”

“Lady Feautre!” Lady Delattre said.

Several other dinner guests started to correct Lady Feautre, but Cinderella had enough.

Cinderella set her wine glass down and stood. Her eyes flashed as she pushed her

chair back. “Lady Feautre, Countess of Eveloy. When you become of such an elevated title that you may question me, Duchess of Aveyron, I will listen to you. Until that day comes, I suggest you bite your tongue. I will forget your ill-bred remarks against myself and Colonel Friedrich if you apologize this instant. If you do not, I shall pay a visit to the courts of peerage tomorrow and lodge a complaint.”

The dinner party froze, as if put under a spell. Since Erlauf took Trieux over, the remaining Trieux nobles united—associating with each other in spite of the difference in rank. It was rarely brought up that as the only remaining Duchess of Trieux, Cinderella held more power than all of those in the room.

Rank had not been pulled since Trieux became Erlauf, although the option was still available. As a Duchess—even a penniless one—Cinderella would absolutely win the complaint. (Not everything had changed with Erlauf, after all.) The silence of the room was broken when Lord Girard nudged his son, causing Marcus to rocket up into a standing position.

“The Girards will stand witness,” he said, earning an approving nod from his parents.

“As will the Rosseuxes,” Julien said, glancing at his parents as he also stood.

“Forgive me for my ill-timed words,” Lady Feautre stiffly said.

“I will forgive you for your poor conduct in voicing the worst of your thoughts,” Cinderella said before she sat.

Julien and Marcus mimicked her, both uncomfortable with the power Cinderella—heiress and titled—wielded.

“So this weather mage. What was his name?” Lord Girard asked.



“I did not have the chance to ask. He was in quite a hurry to pay homage to an enchantress—a full-ranked Enchantress, not a specialized one—who recently arrived in Trieux, that is to say, Erlauf,” Lord Delattre said.

“An enchantress, you say?” Lord Leroy’s son said.

“Indeed.”

Cinderella relaxed as conversation resumed around her. She was about to start eating again when Marcus whispered to her, “Well done, ‘Rella. It’s about time someone put that old bat in her place.”

“Marcus,” Cinderella hissed.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

On her other side Julien shook with the laughter he struggled to mask.

Marcus grinned and asked Julien across Cinderella. “You’ll tell your sister about the fireworks she missed tonight?”

“I don’t think she would forgive me if I didn’t,” Julien said.

“She’ll be upset she missed a good showing,” Marcus said, his voice loaded with satisfaction before he turned all of his attention to his food.

“I think someone is sweet on your sister,” Cinderella whispered to Julien.

“She’s twelve,” Julien said.

“And he’s barely fourteen,” Cinderella said.

Julien made a pained face. “I hope we won’t have to visit them often. They will be titled terrors with no sense of etiquette.”

“Come now; it won’t be that bad.”

“Yes, it will. My sister has taken to tree-climbing—heaven help her if Father finds out.”

“And your mother?”

“Turns a blind eye. Secretly I think she wants to encourage her,” Julien sighed.

“Think of it this way: they will be a matched pair.”

“Wild hoodlums, the both of them,” Julien said.

Cinderella laughed, aware Lady Feautre watched her with great anger.

The following day, Cinderella still boiled with anger at some of her fellow Trieux nobles. She went to the market with Vitore, but her sour mood scared off three customers before Vitore sent her out back behind the tent to restock baskets with produce.

When potatoes persisted in rolling out of a misshaped basket—one she had made—Cinderella lost her temper and threw the empty basket.

It rolled a few paces before falling at a pair of Erlauf army boots. “Why is it that the past few times I have seen you, you are in the process of an emotional outburst?”

Cinderella sighed. “Hello, Friedrich.”

Friedrich snatched the basket up before joining Cinderella with her produce. “It is too hot for such anger. What is wrong?” He asked as he briefly removed his hat from his head to wave it in front of his face.

Cinderella’s shoulders slumped. “It is nothing.”

Friedrich replaced his hat. “I doubt that.”

“It is only...It’s just...”

“Yes?”

“Last night I dined with the remaining Trieux nobles, and...they talked about us.”

Friedrich handed the basket back to Cinderella. “So you want me to stop hanging about you, I take it?”

“What? No! I’m just so angry at what they implied,” Cinderella said, the basket creaking ominously in her hands as she clenched it.

“What did they imply?”

“That you are a dishonorable knave who hangs about me and salivates like an animal.”

“Did they say nothing of you?”

“Oh, well, they said my conduct was reprehensible. But what makes me so angry is that they would say such judgmental, ill-mannered things when they don’t even know you!”

Friedrich slid out of his Erlauf burgundy army jacket. “I’m from Erlauf. They don’t have to know me to judge me. Or so they would think.”

“But how could they dare to say such, such foolish lies about you and imply that I am morally ruined for speaking to you?” Cinderella spat.

Friedrich did not respond and looked out at the bustling back street.

“...Have your friends said the same sort of things about me to you?” Cinderella asked.

“Hm? Not quite. They know I wouldn’t madly throw myself at just any girl,” he said,

brushing the fringe of Cinderella's bangs.

"They don't think less of you for befriending a Trieux lady?"

"I don't think so. They tease me a bit, mostly because they haven't seen you yet," he said.

"Why would there be such a stark difference between our treatment? One would think you would have it worse."

"Why?"

"Because you're from Erlauf! You took over Trieux. Wouldn't they look down on you for this?"

"Now that's prejudice if I ever heard it," Friedrich said.

"What do you mean?" Cinderella asked.

"It hasn't escaped me that in spite of our close relationship," Friedrich said, attempting to lean forward and kiss Cinderella on the forehead. She nudged him away before he could get too close. "You seem rather intent on making Erlauf the villain of the story."

"That's because you are," Cinderella said.

"Pet."

"It is true! Erlauf invaded Trieux. Erlauf slaughtered the noble class. Those of us from Trieux are stuck in a quagmire of taxes imposed by your Erlauf Queen!"

“But, Darling, you’re overlooking one thing.”

“What?”

“Why did Erlauf invade in the first place?”

Cinderella looked away, but Friedrich was not about to let the subject drop.

“I know you know the reason, Cinderella. Everyone does. Please tell me: why did evil Erlauf invade?”

Cinderella muttered under her breath.

“I didn’t hear that.”

“Why do I have to say it?”

Friedrich’s piercing eye settled on Cinderella with an unusual amount of weight.

“Because it is very important to me that we have an understanding on this matter. Why did Erlauf invade?”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Cinderella sighed. “Because Trieux first attacked Erlauf.”

“And why did your family and the other five remaining Trieux families of nobility survive?”

“Must we have this conversation? We both know why.”

“I said this was important.”

Cinderella rubbed the back of her neck. “Because we are the only six families that voted against invading Erlauf in a meeting of the House of Lords. Because of the landslide positive vote, our King approved the petition, and the attack went forward.”

“In the which you were slaughtered against our military might. We turned the tables and instead invaded and conquered Trieux. Poetic justice, one might say.”

“You don’t need to sound so gleeful about it,” Cinderella said, dusting off her dress.

“We aren’t done yet.”

Cinderella placed her hands on her hips. “What more do you want me to say? That Trieux is responsible for the slaughter of your soldiers and the draining of your coffers?”

“Why are you so loyal to your servants? Most Trieux families treat servants like pieces of furniture. No one else is so blasted stubborn in holding on to them. Before the war, you likely saw them as pieces of baggage as well. Why will you not let them

go?”

“Because it was the Aveyron servants who risked their lives to speak up for my father and me in an Erlauf court of justice. They were the ones who told that ice-cold queen of yours that Father voted against the war. There, are you satisfied?” Cinderella said, turning her back to the Colonel.

Friedrich placed his hands on Cinderella’s shoulders as she transferred onions from a crate to a basket. “It does not give me joy to make you say this. I just want you to admit Trieux is not the wounded lamb you want it to be.”

Cinderella’s motions slowed. “I know we were wrong. Father said we were fools for thinking we could take Erlauf on, and our government and nobles were too greedy to see that. But...” Cinderella turned around. “Haven’t we been punished enough? Haven’t we paid enough, sweated enough, to make up for that? Must my children and my children’s children mortgage their futures for the sake of one foolish generation?”

“You have, and soon, I hope, your trials will end. The Crown Prince knows the country he will inherit is not united, but terribly divided. He will have to reckon Trieux to Erlauf for it to be a solid kingdom. Our children will not have to go through what you have gone through. The Erlauf Royal Family will see to it.”

“I have no confidence in your royalty. And our children? We are not married,” Cinderella said, ducking out from under Friedrich’s hands.

Friedrich ignored the nay-say. “You will have to forgive them, you know.”

“Who?”

“The Erlauf Royal Family. They are not doing this to be cruel.”



“I will admit Trieux marched to their doom, but you forget: I am the daughter of a man who was forced to marry an Erlauf widow against his will, a woman I still house and feed. I have sold almost every personal possession I own and almost every decorative piece in Aveyron to pay your Erlauf Royal Family’s taxes. I very much doubt they are doing this as a kindness.”

Friedrich sighed. “I suppose your recognition of Trieux’s actions is the most I could hope for today.”

“Wait a moment,” Cinderella said, turning around to face him again. “You have some admitting to do.”

“What more is there to admit? I agree the taxes are heavy and that the Crown Prince will have to do something about that,” Friedrich said.

“Yes, but that isn’t all. Trieux was wrong and terribly foolish, but the grip Queen Freja has over the country isn’t healthy,” Cinderella said.

“What do you mean?”

“Queen Freja acts more like a tyrant than a monarch, and for once I am not referring to the taxes.”

Friedrich frowned.

“Hear me out. She has absolute control, and no one holds her accountable. In Trieux, each noble family had a vote in the House of Lords. The King still had the ultimate power, but he often leaned on the House to make decisions.”

“You mean to say Queen Freja should add a group of law-makers to our government?”

“No,” Cinderella said. “The side-effect of having the House of Lords is everyone knew the government’s business. Nothing was hidden—it’s how Aveyron’s servants knew of Father’s vote.”

“And what has that to do with Queen Freja?” Friedrich asked.

“The reason Trieux citizens treat her with suspicion is because we cannot trust her. If she explained why the random searches and increased patrols are necessary, or if she had a reason for taxing us to poverty, we could better accept it. We would still hate her, but I do not think the tensions between our countries would be quite so...overwhelming,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich blinked. “You want her to explain herself?”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

“Yes. The Erlauf government is shrouded in secrecy. We are expected to accept the actions of the royal family blindly and without question. That is most assuredly not the way of Trieux.”

Friedrich shifted. “In the Army, I give orders and expect my men to follow them...but usually an explanation accompanies the orders. It would be dangerous to send ignorant soldiers into combat.”

“Exactly!” Cinderella triumphantly said.

“Perhaps you are right,” Friedrich said, looking uncomfortable. “From a logical standpoint, I can see why it would assure you of Trieux to hear of the queen’s doings. As an Erlauf citizen, though, I do not think it would be easy to change that aspect of the Erlauf monarchy. It is ingrained in our culture that we must trust our monarch implicitly.”

“Then our best hope is the Crown Prince,” Cinderella said. “If he is as aware of the strife as you say he is, he might be more accepting of change.”

Friedrich cleared his throat. “I think a great deal of it will also rest in whomever he marries.”

“Perhaps...,” Cinderella said, considering the thought.

Friedrich was quiet for a few moments. “Did you plant the flowers?” he asked changing the subject.

“The day after you gave me the seeds. They have already begun sprouting,” Cinderella said.

“Already? It has been barely two weeks.”

“The book you gave me mentioned they have a short growing period.”

“Good. I expect you will be able to turn a profit more swiftly than originally estimated?” Friedrich said.

“Indeed. Thank you again for the seeds.”

“Your desires are my goals, Pet.”

“Must you call me that?” Cinderella asked.

“Of course; it is endearing.”

“It is not. It is, ugh. How would you feel if I called you...Scamp?”

“I would be touched.”

“Rogue?”

“Honored.”

“...Fred?”

Friedrich pulled back, as if Cinderella had backhanded him. “You wouldn’t,” he said.

Cinderella smiled and rubbed her hands in delight. “Why not? Fred is a respectable

name.”

Friedrich winced. “Words cannot describe how much I dislike that particular shortening of my name.”

“Then at least you will know how I feel.”

“Cinderella,” Friedrich said.

“Yes?”

Friedrich sighed. “You’re no fun.”

“Really? I think I’m hysterical.”

“Killjoy.”

“Whatever you say, Fred.”

“It seems General Hardbutt intends to keep the Second Regiment at Werra,” Merrich said, sipping his pint of ale.

“I believe it is in preparation of Queen Freja’s departure at the end of the year,” Diederick, a friend of Friedrich’s and a government official, said. “The country is stable, but if she intends to tour the lands, the Third Regiment will accompany her,” he said, swirling his mug.

“And the Commander,” Merrich added.

Diederick nodded. “And the Commander,” he echoed. “Their absence will make things... interesting.”

“I don’t think a rebellion is very likely,” Merrich said. “The taxes are stiff, yes, but the commoners don’t seem to mind them too much, and there’s hardly anyone left to lead them.”

“The remaining Trieux nobles are too aware of the precarious situation they are in. No, my friend, Trieux is definitely a part of Erlauf. At least on paper. The peoples’ hearts and loyalties don’t belong to Erlauf, but that is not something I am not responsible for,” Diederick said.

Merrich laughed and leaned back in his chair. “Do you hear that, Friedrich? Friedrich.”

“She called me Fred,” Friedrich said, scowling into his pint.

Merrich laughed again and pounded his hand on the table at which they sat.

“Who?” Diederick asked, adjusting his wire-rimmed eyeglasses.

“His Trieux misses,” Merrich grinned. “Lady Lacreux. She has the looks of the troll, but she sounds like barrels of fun.”

“Lady Lacreux? She does not look—,” Diederick started. He quieted when Friedrich kicked him under the table. “So that is whom you have chosen? She has a fiery temper, I’ve been told. Are you certain you have not bitten off more than you can chew?”

“She’s the one for me,” Friedrich said, lazily balancing his chair on the back two legs.

He and his friends were seated outdoors in front of a tavern where they could watch commoners—Trieux and Erlauf alike—hurry on their way, call out their wares, and gossip and laugh in the open.

Diederick shrugged. “Personally speaking, it makes very little difference to me whom you marry. You will be the one to live with her. You think she is a good choice in every way?”

“Her servants would die for her—although I doubt she knows. They handle her with kid gloves.”

“How do you know?”

“A footman popped one of my soldiers in the head when I sent him to check in on her. The footman thought he was spying on her. The butler nearly busted my man before I could send word,” Friedrich said.

“She is a good choice. Her blood and heritage will bring legitimacy to your position—but do you think she’ll actually say yes?” Diederick asked.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

“I’m working on her,” Friedrich said. “She’s softening to Erlauf. Some.”

“When do we get to meet her?” Merrich asked.

“Not for a long while,” Friedrich said. “I don’t want you scaring her off.”

“I’m hurt,” Merrich said before taking a swig of his drink. “I can’t believe you brought her by the camp when I wasn’t there,”

“You took her to the First Regiment’s camp?” Diederick asked.

Friedrich nodded. “Yes.”

“Part of his plan to soften her,” Merrich said.

“I see,” Diederick said.

“I think he’s just acting like a besotted fool,” Merrich said.

“I am not besotted.”

“Then why are you pouting over being called Fred?”

“...”

“And that is my point,” Merrich said with an irritating amount of superiority.



Friedrich rolled his eyes. “You’re just...,” he trailed off when he saw a head of shockingly brilliant red hair.

“This is the historic district of Alzette. The Great Erlauf architect Filibert Frejem designed it over a hundred years ago with the purpose of stimulating commerce. He made revolutionary changes that allowed for shops to be placed close together, with limited fire hazards.”

There was no mistaking that mop of red hair. And even though she was mostly blocked by a group of Erlauf soldiers, Friedrich could never forget the white flag she wagged above her head.

It was Cinderella.

All the soldiers with her were from the First Regiment. Friedrich thought he saw Ivo and Kurt among the crowd, perhaps even Gustav.

“I’m just?” Merrich prompted.

“Uhhh,” Friedrich said.

Diederick turned in his chair to see what Friedrich stared at. “Oh, is that—,”

“If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I must leave for a moment. I will return for more drinks, you can be sure,” Friedrich said, standing up so quickly his chair was thrown to the ground. “Keep him here,” Friedrich said to Diederick as Merrich righted the chair.

“As you wish,” Diederick said.

“You’re a good man,” Friedrich said, slapping him on the back before he hurried after

Cinderella and his men.

He caught up with them when they made a turn, heading towards the Trieux Royal Library.

“Down this road we have—,” Cinderella said.

“Isn’t this a sight,” Friedrich said, darting in front of them. “My Lady Love and my underlings,” he said, glowering at his men.

They sheepishly scuffed their boots on the ground but said nothing.

“Good afternoon, Friedrich. Do you ever work? I’m starting to suspect you don’t,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich nonchalantly adjusted his eye patch. “I thought we agreed you were finished with historical tours.”

“Yes, perhaps. But these fine gentlemen are soldiers. Your soldiers. I couldn’t be safer anywhere else than I am with them. And besides, they asked so sweetly. Marie said they saw the sign in one of Armel’s stores and asked for a tour with all due niceties and polish.”

Friedrich looked from Cinderella to his men. “And the lot of you were filled with the sudden thirst for history lessons, I suppose?”

Gustav nodded passionately. “Yes, sir,” he said. “We wanted to experience what you so deeply enjoyed on your tours with Lady Lacreux.”

Another soldier smacked the back of Gustav’s head.

“What he means to say,” Ivo drawled. “Is he never knew Erlauf history was entrenched so deeply in Trieux.”

The rest of the tour attendees nodded in agreement with Ivo.

Friedrich sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“He’s being selfish by trying to keep all this historical knowledge to himself,” Cinderella murmured.

“I heard that,” Friedrich said.

“You were meant to,” Cinderella said with a smile as sweet as fresh baked pastries.

“I suppose even if I tried to stop this, you would not stand for it?” Friedrich asked.

“I would want them to get their money’s worth, else I would feel terrible,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich studied his men with his stoniest look. Kurt and Ivo stood strong, but Gustav and a few others shivered. “Just this once,” he said to them. “Never again. Tell anyone back at camp with the same harebrained scheme: NO.”

“Yes, sir,” his men said, saluting him.

“Well then, let us continue. As I was saying, down this road one may find the historical building of Volognex.”

“Oohhhh,” Gustav said in appreciation.

“Quite so. It is famous because...,” Cinderella’s voice trailed out of hearing range as

the soldiers trailed after her like a herd of attentive cows.

Friedrich adjusted his hat. “I want them to like her. I want her to like them,” he repeated to himself. He groaned as he headed back to his friends. “Who am I kidding? Diederick is right. She is a firecracker.”

## Chapter 9

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Cinderella stood in the field of flowers, her bare feet wet from the morning dew, and watched beautiful flowers of gold and sunshine yellow sway in the breeze. Because of their circular shape and the way they swayed, the Sun Skip flowers looked like tiny suns bounding across the field.

The wind tugged at Cinderella's apron and skirts, and she clamped her chin-length hair to head with her hands as she looked at her gorgeous crop. "I don't know if they're going to sell, but they are beautiful," she said, her gray eyes softening as she inhaled the sweet fragrance.

"It is as you say, Mademoiselle," Gilbert said.

Two months ago, Friedrich had first given her the flower seeds. Now, near the last month of summer, it was time to test his words. "Cut enough to fill a dozen buckets. We'll take some to the market today," Cinderella said.

"I will inform the men, Mademoiselle," Gilbert said.

"Thank you," Cinderella said, turning from the field. "There is something I must do. It will take but a minute," Cinderella said.

"Of course, Mademoiselle," Gilbert bowed.

Cinderella picked up a wooden bucket, filled it at the kitchen well, and grabbed a ladle before she returned to the flower field. As she walked the perimeter, she watched the servants cut the flowers with great care before arranging them in buckets of water.

“They look striking in the crimson, morning sunlight,” Cinderella said as she stopped by a copse of trees and held out the bucket.

Ivo—one of Friedrich’s men—bowed as he stepped out from behind the tree. “My apologies, Mademoiselle. I did not mean to be intrusive,” he said, taking the bucket.

“You weren’t. It is merely that I know better. One of you is always skulking in my shadow. Or is it more than one today?” Cinderella asked.

“The Colonel has forbidden me from mentioning your three-man guard,” Ivo said before he sipped water from the ladle.

“Three of them? Goodness, my criminal skills are rusting. I only saw you,” Cinderella sighed. “Where are the others?”

“The barn roof and the bushes by the kitchens.”

“I see,” Cinderella said. “I am going to the market as usual. Would you like a ride in the wagon?”

Ivo shook his head. “Thank you for the offer, but we will catch an assailant off guard if he doesn’t see us with you.”

Cinderella squinted up at the grizzled soldier. “It’s been months since Friedrich was attacked. Isn’t the danger over by now?”

“Not as long as the Colonel courts you, Mademoiselle.”

Cinderella sighed. “Sometimes I wonder if your charming Colonel is more trouble than he is worth.”

“It will delight him to hear that you called him charming.”

Cinderella snorted and felt for the chain of her dragon necklace. “Perhaps. Could you signal to your comrades to come out of hiding for a moment? I would like to see you all watered before we leave for the market. It is to be a hot day, and you all make me uncomfortable with your long sleeves and armor.”

“As you wish, Mademoiselle,” Ivo said, holding up a small mirror. He flashed it several times, making sunlight bounce across the land.

Cinderella saw a soldier slide off the cow barn roof, and another slip out of the bushes Cinderella stood by when filling the bucket.

“Thank you, Ivo,” Cinderella said, taking the bucket back. “You are a saint of patience. I don’t know how you stand these boring guard duties.”

Ivo shrugged.

“What?” Cinderella asked.

“The Colonel doesn’t force us to guard you. We sign up for the duty.”

Cinderella tilted her head. “If you will excuse my bluntness: why?”

Ivo shifted, making his weapons clack and his armor creak.

Cinderella flattened her lips. “I will wait until Gustav is on duty and ask him. He will tell me.”

Ivo rolled his eyes, more in disgust over his young associate than Cinderella’s craftiness. “As you wish, Mademoiselle,” he said.

Cinderella grinned and started to walk away. “Carry on, Ivo.”

“Aye-aye, Mademoiselle.”

Cinderella watched Vitore sell an armload of the Sun Skip flowers to a well-to-do Erlauf woman. After the lady passed over the right amount of change, she took her flowers and walked through the market—the flowers marking her with a halo of gold.

“Vitore, how many flowers have we sold?” Cinderella whispered.

“All but one bucket, Mademoiselle,” Vitore whispered back.

“The market opened an hour ago!”

Vitore crossed herself. “Mercy on Aveyron, I never thought flowers would outsell hotcakes.”

“Most of the customers are from Erlauf,” Cinderella said.

“All the customers, except for Madame Marie,” Vitore said.

“This is a strange phenomenon. I thought Friedrich exaggerated the Erlauf love of nature, but perhaps he didn’t. I wonder if we could charge more per flower...”

“Blessings be said over your Colonel. I will never call him a rake or rogue again,” Vitore said looking to the sky with clasped hands.

Cinderella grinned at the maid, but the gossip’s face was creased in seriousness. “Don’t tell him that,” Cinderella said. “He’ll be insufferable with smugness for a week.”



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

An Erlauf government worker approached the stand, and Vitore lunged to help him.

As the man bought the remaining armful of flowers, Cinderella started making calculations. She had one field of flowers, but she needed to keep some planted in Aveyron so the seeds could be harvested. They cut a small portion of the flowers that morning, and according to the book Friedrich gave her, Sun Skip flowers could be harvested and sold for two weeks.

If they raised the price of the flowers...

“Is it enough, Mademoiselle?” Vitore asked, watching Cinderella count on her fingers.

“It’s not,” Cinderella said.

Vitore drooped.

“But, it’s quite a bit. Depending how high we can raise the price, it could cover a sizable portion of the fine,” Cinderella said.

Vitore smiled. “We will make it, Mademoiselle,” she said.

“I hope so,” Cinderella said.

As Vitore bustled about, collecting the empty buckets, Cinderella tried not to despair. The flowers would take care of a fourth of the fine. It was an incredible amount for a single field, much less a single crop. If Aveyron pulled through this, Cinderella would

expand the crops to include a variety of flowers. However, there were few other options of fundraising as the rest of Aveyron's income was already spoken for between upkeep, servant wages, and regular taxes.

Still, chopping a large chunk off the fine was more than Cinderella imagined. Hope was not lost, yet.

"I'm going to step out for a few minutes," Cinderella said, untying her apron and stowing it beneath a basket.

Vitore raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, I'm going to call on Friedrich," Cinderella said.

"You needn't explain yourself to me, Mademoiselle."

"I doubt that," Cinderella dourly said. "I won't be long. I'm sure even Friedrich must be working this early in the morning," she said, running a hand through her bright, silky hair.

"Of course, Mademoiselle," Vitore said.

Cinderella shook her skirts. "I won't be long."

"You've already said that, Mademoiselle."

"Good morning, Vitore."

"Good morning, Mademoiselle."

Cinderella left the cheeky maid and the market, and marched towards the outskirts of

Werra. The closer she got to the regiment's camp, the more it seemed Cinderella left Trieux for Erlauf. Most government officials and officers made their homes near the army camps, and their families milled up and down the streets during the day. Cinderella could tell their country's heritage because everything about them was darker—their hair, eyes, even their clothes were dark and boring.

Every once in a while, there would be a splash of gold against the muted Erlauf colors—someone wearing a Sun Skip pinned to his shirt, woven into her hair, or set in the band of his hat.

“Such a different culture,” Cinderella murmured.

When she reached the First Regiment's camp, the soldiers guarding the gates did nothing to stop her. They saluted her, but their eyes passed over her without care. However, as she passed through the gates, a large square of scarlet red cloth was hoisted up the flag pole with the Erlauf flag and the flag of the First Regiment.

The path Cinderella took was dotted with sedate, orderly soldiers. Like the ones at the gate, they all saluted her. Occasionally one or two of the soldiers smiled at her, but most appeared to move along at a brisk pace.

Cinderella was not fooled.

Up in a watch tower, a soldier cawed like a crow, and at the edge of her vision, she saw more than one soldier sprint to the officer's lodging—her destination—as if hellhounds were after them.

A soldier “accidentally” let go of his patrol dog. The dog bounded up to Cinderella for a petting before the soldier leisurely collected the animal. Berta also “happened” upon Cinderella and invited her to the kitchens.

“Don’t you want a pasty, or Apple rings? You’re just a small morsel. You need to eat more lest the wind carry you off,” Berta said, planting her meaty fists on her hips.

“After,” Cinderella said. “I need to see Friedrich first.”

“As you wish, Your Grace,” Berta said.

Cinderella was almost to the front door of the officer’s building when a window on the second floor opened.

Friedrich—impossible to miss with his black eye patch, popped out of the window. He sat on the frame before flinging himself off it.

Cinderella held in a shriek, but Friedrich landed with ease. He paused long enough to brush himself off and twitch his Erlauf burgundy jacket into place before speaking. “Cinderella, my Pet, how happy you make me by coming to visit,” Friedrich said, curling an arm around Cinderella’s shoulders.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

“You must be the only officer in the whole Army who involves his regiment in his personal relationships,” Cinderella said, slipping out of the arm, although she followed Friedrich away from the building.

“You hurt me, but no. I’ll have you know it’s a family tradition. When my Father courted my Mother, he used an even more elaborate system involving his soldiers. However, he didn’t have a regiment under his disposal, so I would like to think I can still beat his antics,” Friedrich said, moving at a rapid pace.

“Is there a reason we are running away from your office?”

“It’s not my office we’re running from.”

“The general you serve?”

Friedrich hesitated. “Yes. Yes, it is my general I don’t want you to meet. Certainly. You are so sharp,” Friedrich said, reaching for Cinderella’s hand.

Cinderella darted out of range. “You’re lying.”

“Pet! How could you say such a thing? I am deeply wounded,” Friedrich said, relaxing after they darted behind the mess hall—which was finished and fully operational.

“I doubt that. You will be a gloating monster after you hear my news,” Cinderella said.

“You’ve decided to stop denying your feelings and plan to elope and run away with me?” Friedrich said, perking with interest.

“No.”

“Oh,” Friedrich said, easing back into a stance of nonchalance. “Then no. I don’t think I will be doing much gloating.”

“I am here to humble myself and admit you were right in your advice to plant flowers.”

“So they’ve bloomed, then?”

“They’ve bloomed, and I sold a batch at the market this morning.”

“Sold out already, eh?”

“Yes.”

“In all fairness, it seemed unlikely you would ever know that about our culture unless you visited Erlauf. As you haven’t many flowers besides wild flowers here, we don’t often get to express our passion,” Friedrich said.

“All the same, I doubted the wisdom of your words. Thank you for pushing the subject.”

“Of course. Anything for you, Cinderella,” Friedrich said, brushing Cinderella’s cheek with his fingers. “Will you make much off them?”

Cinderella nodded. “A fair amount.”

“But not enough to cover the landholding fine?”

“No.”

Friedrich nodded. “That’s unfortunate.”

“I will keep trying. The summer isn’t over yet,” Cinderella said.

“Perhaps our sweet queen would accept a partial payment?”

“Your queen is a harpy, and I very much doubt she would bend that much,” Cinderella sourly said.

“She’s not so bad,” Friedrich said. “Haven’t you heard? Next week she and the Erlauf Commander—the consort—are reopening the Trieux Royal Library.”

“What?”

“Yes. It has been renamed. It’s now the Erlauf Repository of Stories and Education.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“They’re calling it the Rose for short. See? I told you flowers are important to us.”

“I believe you, now. I am impressed she means to open it again, but it may not help me. If they limit the patronage—as they did when it was under Trieux rule—it might be even more difficult for me to conduct my farming research. Do you know what the membership fee is? Knowing your queen, I should think it to be the price of a good horse,” Cinderella said.

“No, it’s free.”

“Free?”

Friedrich nodded. “Free for everyone—commoner, servant, noble, Trieux or Erlauf. Everyone can use it.”

Cinderella tucked her head, uncertain. “That’s very...generous.”

“The patrolling soldiers—mostly from the Second Regiment—were relieved to hear the news. With the library opening again, they no longer need to fear embarrassment by the book thief that persists in evading capture,” Friedrich said.

“How fortuitous.”

“There’s going to be an opening ceremony and everything. You should go,” Friedrich said.

“Will you be attending?”

Friedrich sighed. “Alas, I cannot. I am being forced to work myself to the bone for the occasion.”

Cinderella laughed. “You haven’t worked a full day since I’ve met you.”

“That isn’t true,” Friedrich objected.

“Hah!”

“Perhaps I have worked less since becoming acquainted with you. Unfortunately, next week even I cannot weasel my way out of work—though I long to do so.”

“It saddens me to be told that, Fred.”



Friedrich laughed, a sound that caressed Cinderella's skin like velvet. "At least you are beginning to acknowledge how you pine for me."

"Speaking of pine, I must return to the market."

"You pine for that loose-mouthed maid of yours?"

"No, for our customers' money."

"Sometimes I worry you will marry me only for my money," Friedrich said, leaning over her.

Correctly interpreting his movements, Cinderella squirmed to the side before he could kiss her cheek. "One day someone is going to hear the way you moon over me and report back to whatever Erlauf lady your parents have selected for you," she said.

"It makes no difference. My parents already know all about you," Friedrich said, losing the jesting edge to his voice.

“What?” Cinderella said, freezing.

“Do you really think I could use my regiment as a sort of go-between and not tell my parents?” Friedrich said.

“Isn’t that a part of sewing wild oats and what not?” Cinderella said, her forehead scrunching. She had the barest sense of what “sewing wild oats” meant, and suspected it was wilder than what she was picturing.

“The moment I chose you I told them,” Friedrich said, sliding his hand under Cinderella’s chin.

Cinderella shifted and avoided looking at Friedrich’s painfully intense eye.

Friedrich sighed. “I wish you would stop clamping up whenever I mention how serious I am,” he said, his voice low like a dog’s growl.

“It’s because you aren’t serious,” Cinderella said. “You always flirt and joke.”

“No, I flirt and joke because I doubt you would stay in my company for longer than a moment if you knew just how serious I am,” Friedrich said, sliding his fingers up Cinderella’s jawline.

Cinderella caught his hand and pulled it away from her face. “Friedrich, I can’t.”

Friedrich sighed and looked up at the sky. “I know.”

The pair was silent until Friedrich tore his gaze from the sky and smiled at Cinderella. “I will let you run back to your market stand. Take care, Pet.”

“You as well, Friedrich,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich was the first to go, leaving Cinderella in the shadow of the mess hall.

Her relationship with the Colonel was complicated, not just because of the position Cinderella was in, but because of who they were. “It would never work,” she said.

Cinderella squared her shoulders and put her chin up. “It would never work, and he’s not wholly sincere,” she said before she turned on her heels. “I know perfectly well he’s a rogue. He cannot be serious. It just isn’t possible.”

Cinderella realized she sounded more like she was trying to convince herself than stating a fact.

It would be easier if he were joking, Cinderella thought before she angrily shook the topic from her head. “Sun Skips! That is what I should think of. I must speak to Pierre about their price, and ask how many we should harvest per day so as to not flood the market...”

“Studies and academics are vital to humanity. They allow limits to be pushed and countries to be changed,” Queen Freja said, standing on the front steps of the Trieux Royal Library—now the Erlauf Repository of Stories and Education—with her husband, three army officers, and two government officials.

“It is my hope all parts of Erlauf will flourish if its people are properly educated and given the opportunity to seek out knowledge,” Queen Freja said. Her voice was hard, like iron.

“Every person, whether he or she is a true scholar or a baker, should have access to books,” the queen continued.

Cinderella narrowed her eyes as she studied the foreign queen. She had seen her before—she was presented to Freja when she inherited her title from her father—but back then Cinderella saw her as the hardened woman who was slowly choking Trieux to death.

Cinderella took in the woman’s height and lean stature with new eyes. There was something about her face and the sharp angles of her cheekbones that seemed oddly familiar.

“She goes on, doesn’t she, Mademoiselle?” Vitore darkly muttered as the queen continued with her speech.

Cinderella shrugged. “It’s rare for her to do something good here. I am sure she must capitalize on the few chances she has,” Cinderella said, safely surrounded by Trieux market vendors.

The milkmaid whose stand was next to Aveyron’s in the market squawked, “Good? The library was already built and furnished. She’s just renamed it,” she said, brushing goat hair off her skirt.

“She is opening it to the public,” Cinderella said.

“For the moment,” Vitore grunted.

Cinderella shifted her attention to the queen’s consort—the Commander of all Erlauf armies. The man was so uninvolved in palace politics and court happenings that Cinderella didn’t even know his name. She did know he was the terror of the Erlauf Army. His title was not something worn casually. The man was a brilliant strategist

and just as hard and unmoving as his wife.

He looked incredibly common. Cinderella wasn't sure if she would be able to pick him out of a crowd if he wasn't standing next to Queen Freja.

"Their sons must be like slabs of marble," Cinderella said. Neither of the Erlauf princes had deigned to attend the opening ceremony.

Cinderella was not surprised.

"Is that a surprise considering who their parents are?" the acid tongued milkmaid asked.

"Hear, hear," Vitore said.

When Cinderella looked at them with raised eyebrows they blinked innocently.

"What is it, Mademoiselle?" Vitore asked.

The milkmaid was not so shy. "Perhaps that Colonel of yours isn't so bad," she grudgingly said. "But you can't tell me those Erlauf princes are as good as him."

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

“No, I should think not,” Cinderella agreed.

“...Therefore, it is with great joy that I pronounce the Erlauf Repository of Stories and Education to be open and free to all. Let no one keep his fellow man from these halls, and let knowledge pour forth from its doors,” Queen Freja finished.

Cinderella clapped half-heartedly with her fellow market vendors. The pockets of Erlauf citizens cheered louder, a few even threw yellow Sun Skips—purchased earlier that morning from Aveyron’s market stall—on the library steps.

“Well, that’s done,” the milkmaid said.

“I would bet my eyeteeth before the week is out there will be some sort of book tax that all property owners who have owned their land for more than five years must pay,” Cinderella said.

“She is the rotten sort to do that, if you don’t mind me saying, Mademoiselle.”

“Not at all,” Cinderella sighed, fluffing her skirts.

“Shall we return to the stand, Mademoiselle?”

“Not yet. I want to have a look inside first,” Cinderella said, nodding towards the library. “You may go if you like, though. Don’t let me keep you.”

“As you wish, Madmoiselle.”

“I will go with you, Vitore. I don’t trust Chas with my goats, not for long, anyway. Last time they got into his stand and ate two lengths of rope,” the milkmaid said, referring to the ropemaker.

“Thank you,” Cinderella said before the pair disappeared in the push of the crowd.

The consort and his soldiers pushed back the crowds, opening up a pathway to the library. The first through the doors were Erlauf scholars—eager to get their hands on the priceless volumes the Trieux Nobles gathered over the ages.

After the scholars went Trieux commoners. The library was built and founded decades ago, but it was exclusive in the patronage it allowed, so the average citizen rarely got to see so much as a glimpse inside the decadent building. It was probably why they attended the ceremony—so they could poke their heads inside and gawk at what was once denied to them.

Cinderella sat on the lip of a large fountain—designed for watering horses—and waited for the crowds to depart.

The consort controlled his soldiers—spacing them out and sending a few into the shadows of the library—with several crisp gestures.

Cinderella noted with great interest that none of the Erlauf nobles who had relocated to Werra after the takeover attended the ceremony. Apparently they felt no need to pay homage to their rulers, or so Cinderella suspected as she watched Queen Freja stand alone in the shadows of the library.

The tall, stately woman bent over to pick up a Sun Skip. She brushed the yellow petals with her fingertips, and the hard lines of her face softened to an almost humane expression.

The monarch twirled the flower between her fingers as she returned her gaze to the crowds. People poured up the steps, pressing into the library, but the queen was safe, blocked off by soldiers and standing some feet down the front veranda.

As Cinderella watched, a little Trieux girl who wasn't older than four popped between the stone railings that separated the library veranda from the small courtyard. A soldier moved to intercept the blonde-haired child, but the queen indicated he should remain where he was.

The Trieux girl popped a dirty thumb in her mouth as she stared up at Queen Freja with wide eyes, her pigtails bobbing in the breeze.

Queen Freja broke off half the stem of her Sun Skip and, to Cinderella's surprise, crouched down and wove the flower into one of the little girl's pigtails. When she was finished, Queen Freja smoothed the child's hair and smiled.

The little girl returned the smile before she startled and turned around. "Mama," she called before slipping back through the stone railings, having heard her parent call her name.

Queen Freja brushed off her hands and returned to resembling iron and flint when her consort approached her. The two briefly spoke before a squad of soldiers surrounded the queen and bore her away.

The courtyard emptied as everyone smashed inside the library, but Cinderella stood transfixed.

She realized as she sat there, gaping like a fish, that she hadn't ever seen the queen of Erlauf smile. With great stupefaction, Cinderella also realized when the queen smiled, she bore more than a slight resemblance to Friedrich.



## Chapter 10

A week later, Cinderella walked the length of the dwindling Sun Skip field, reminiscing on Queen Freja's smile.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

The mystery of Freja and Friedrich's resemblance was resolved. When Cinderella visited Friedrich the day after the ceremony, she asked about it. Friedrich reported with a wide smile, "You saw it, too? My family is deeply royal. Our lineage goes far, far back—," Which, as he blathered on about pedigrees and long dead kings, Cinderella took to mean that there was barely any royal blood left in his family, and it was probably more that Queen Freja had mannish facial features.

But the queen's conduct with the little girl intrigued Cinderella. She thought the queen would scorn any Trieux citizen—regardless of their age. But Freja was soft and almost motherly towards the little girl. Was she really as bad as Cinderella thought her to be?

"Mademoiselle?"

"Yes, Jeanne?"

Jeanne bit her lip. "There is a government official here."

"He wishes to see me?"

"No, he says he needs nothing. But he's wandering around and...I would not bother you, but Father is up in the hay fields today," Jeanne said.

Cinderella frowned. "He's just wandering around?"

"He said he is taking inventory of future Erlauf Crown assets."

Anger stiffened Cinderella's spine. "I will see to him. Where is he?"

"By the milking barn."

"Thank you, Jeanne."

"Mademoiselle," Jeanne said. She curtsied, but Cinderella was already walking away, her gray eyes flashing like thunderclouds.

Cinderella found the greasy-looking fellow—some sort of undersecretary judging by his sweat-stained shirt. "Can I help you, Sir?"

The undersecretary counted the cows. "'fraid not," he said.

"I think you fail to understand me, sir," Cinderella said. "I am Duchess Lacreux. How can I help you, or if you need me to use common words, what are you doing?"

"Ah, sorry," the undersecretary said, turning from the cows. "I've been sent to take inventory of your lands."

"Are all lands being re-evaluated for tax purposes?"

"No."

"Then why are you taking inventory?"

The undersecretary scratched his dry scalp. "The crown requested it so plans can be drawn for dividing up the lands and stock after Aveyron reverts to the Crown."

What?

Cinderella forced her expression to remain pleasant. “Did the Crown not receive my first down payment against the fine two days ago?” Cinderella asked.

“No, it was received and recorded,” the undersecretary said. “But it is the Finance Department’s opinion that if it is all you were able to pay off over the first few months of summer, you have no possibility of paying the remaining balance by the end of the month. The queen has plans for Aveyron and wishes to move forward with them as soon as possible.”

That beast! Cinderella thought, taking back the few kind thoughts she had of Queen Freja. That pushy, greedy, flint-hearted witch!

“That may be so, but until the end of the month, Aveyron is mine,” Cinderella said, the controlled coolness of her voice making the undersecretary squirm. “If you have no legal purpose to loiter on my land, I must order you to take your leave. The queen may wait to measure and take inventory until Aveyron belongs to her.”

“Oh, but Her Majesty will be so very disappointed—.”

“Be gone,” Cinderella said, every inch of her body drawing up in nobility and attitude.

The force of her words, although softly spoken, sent the undersecretary scuttling. “As you wish, Lady,” he said before running from Aveyron.

Cinderella watched him go with shaking fists.

Gustav whistled in appreciation as he ducked out from his hiding spot in the barn. “Well said, Your Grace. Even in servants’ dress and dirt, you can issue a command like the Colonel himself. Your Grace?” he said when Cinderella did not acknowledge him and started for Werra.

She had to see Marie.

There was no one in Aveyron Cinderella could speak to. Jeanne was the closest thing she had to a companion, and the young woman made sure to hold Cinderella at an arm's length.

The servants of Aveyron saw Cinderella go, but they did not stop her, or the three Erlauf soldiers who followed her in the shadows.

Cinderella's ears were ringing by the time she reached Marie's residential home. The maid opened the door and took one look at Cinderella before she ran off, calling, "Madame? Madame Marie!" leaving the door wide open.

Cinderella stepped inside, her eyes sweeping through the pleasant parlor situated near the entrance. Her shoulders shook with rage and despair, and she almost leaped out of her skin when Marie came around the corner and said, "Cinderella, what happened?"

Feeling lost, like the ground had dropped out under her feet, Cinderella shrugged. "I hate her, Marie."

"Who?"

"That wretched queen," Cinderella said before the tears started falling.

Marie sighed. "My darling friend," she said before folding her arms around Cinderella in a warm embrace. "Your burden is difficult, and I am sorry for it."

When Marie led Cinderella to a settee, the story came spilling from her lips in a rush of emotion as wild as the tears that splashed her face.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

“She’s so unyielding. And it seems she takes pleasure in this,” Cinderella said after all was told. She wiped her eyes with the linen handkerchief Marie passed to her.

“She might. I can imagine she bears grudges against us for the damages and cost we have been to her country,” Marie said, fussing with Cinderella’s hair before gesturing to a servant.

The servant briefly disappeared, returning to the room with tea and cookies.

Cinderella groaned, a sound that worked its way up from deep in her heart. “She’s hateful.”

“She is,” Marie agreed, her tone tempered, but edged just as sharp as Cinderella’s.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Cinderella admitted. “I was hopeful they would accept a partial payment—perhaps half. But based on my interaction today, I don’t think it is a possibility.”

Marie nodded and served the tea.

“I will have to marry Julien. I summarized that much from our last meeting. Marcus is a sweet boy, and I like his parents better than Julien’s, but he’s terribly smitten with Julien’s sister. He deserves a chance at happiness,” Cinderella said.

Marie pressed her lips together.

“What?” Cinderella asked.

“What about Colonel Friedrich?”

“What about him?”

“Is he not an option?”

Cinderella drank her tea. “I don’t think so,” she said.

“Why not? Do you think he isn’t serious in his pursuit of you?”

“It’s not that,” Cinderella said, setting her teacup down. “I...I don’t want to bring him misery.”

“What do you mean?”

“He might l-love me, but what would happen if we were to marry? So far Erlauf has tolerated our friendship, but what penalty will he pay for marrying me? It could cost him his friends, his post, even his career. I can’t ask him to do that.”

“What if he wants to?” Marie asked. “I know everyone whispers he is a rogue, but, Cinderella, surely you must realize he follows you with the loyalty of a dog?”

Cinderella covered her face with her hands. “I know,” she whispered, her voice breaking.

“Do you love him?” Marie asked after several heartbeats of silence.

“I don’t know.”

“But you would prefer him over Julien?”

“Perhaps.”

Marie smiled sadly. “The problem is you are too noble. You should be self-centered, just this once.”

Cinderella groaned as she pressed her fingers to her puffy eyes. “It’s too late in my life to start thinking of such things now,” Cinderella said with a half-smile when she lowered her hands. “I know what I should do.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I should run away to Loire. I could...join a traveling show or something.”

“I imagine folks would pay to see a noble who feeds pigs, massacres baskets, and runs a market stand,” Marie said.

“I could learn how to ride a trick horse,” Cinderella said.

“Of course.”

“It would be a fine income,” Cinderella insisted.

“Absolutely,” Marie said.

The two girls stared at each other for a moment before erupting into laughter.

“Y-you took years to learn to ride a horse, and now you want to learn trick rides?” Marie laughed.

“Perhaps I could teach a horse to do tricks?” Cinderella said. “Like a dog.”



“That may work better.”

“Or I could make terrible baskets for a living.”

“You know you’re always welcome to live with Armel and me,” Marie said.

Cinderella’s expression softened. “I know, and I thank you. But I am titled and seventeen. I cannot hide from my future forever.”

“I know, but I would be honored to be your safe haven,” Marie said.

“You already are,” Cinderella said.

“Excuse me, Madame,” a maid in a crisp, clean uniform said, bobbing to Marie and Cinderella. “There is a man at the door to see Duchess Lacreux.”

Marie frowned. “What?” she asked as she and Cinderella made their way towards the door.

Out on the front porch, holding the reins of a blood bay horse, was Colonel Friedrich. The Colonel was covered in dust, and the sweeping brim of his hat was cut and squashed. “Sorry, Pet. I would have been here sooner, but I was...indisposed,” he said. He pulled a leather glove off his hand with his teeth. He extended his gloveless hand to Cinderella, gently brushing her cheek bones with his fingers. “I’m filthy, sorry,” he winced.

Cinderella walked into Friedrich, pressing her face into his shoulder.

The collision made dust puff like a cloud, but Friedrich slid his arms around Cinderella after passing off the reins of his horse to Gustav.

Although he cradled Cinderella, Friedrich looked past her to Marie. “Thank you,” he said.

Marie raised an eyebrow. “She was my friend first before she became your heart’s desire. There is no need for you to thank me.”

“All the same, I still thank you,” Friedrich said.

“I am not a dog to be cared for,” Cinderella said into Friedrich’s shoulder.

“Of course you aren’t, Pet. What do you say to a brief ride? We will share my mount,” Friedrich said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Cinderella stepped back from Friedrich's embrace, her composure regained. "Where are we going?"

"Out of Werra for a bit," Friedrich said, adjusting his horse's saddle.

"Very well," Cinderella agreed before she turned back to Marie. "Thank you."

Marie smiled. "I am glad to help in whatever way I can. And I am trying hard not to feel resentful for being replaced."

Cinderella laughed. "He could not replace you. Not ever. You will always be my closest, dearest friend, Marie."

Marie arrogantly tilted her head up as she looked to Friedrich.

"Alright, I admit defeat," Friedrich said before picking Cinderella up and sliding her on his horse. A moment later he was mounted up behind her. "I will never dare to try and come between you two beautiful ladies."

"Enjoy your ride," Marie said.

"We will," Friedrich said before nudging his horse forward.

"Did Gustav tell you everything?" Cinderella asked.

"Yes," Friedrich said, his eyes glued to the bustling streets.

“I’m more hardened than ever towards your queen.”

“She seems horrible because you’re only hearing one side of the orders.”

“Do not try to reconcile her to me,” Cinderella said, her voice sharp.

Friedrich sighed. “I know she has been unusually hard on you.”

“Hard? Hard? She has done her best to make me her legal slave,” Cinderella hissed.

Friedrich was quiet until they left Werra. They lingered within eyesight of his regiment’s camp, but dismounted and walked through a hay field.

“You have a right to hate Queen Freja, and to hate the royal family,” Friedrich said.

“Naturally.”

“But is it the right thing?”

Cinderella tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve gotten over your hate for Erlauf soldiers and commoners, right?”

“Yes,” Cinderella said with great hesitation.

“Why?”

“Because I have grown to realize and accept they are people too. I’ve known all along about Erlauf citizens, but it was difficult to reconcile the thought with soldiers—who killed my neighbors and associates,” Cinderella said.

“And you also admit Trieux was in the wrong?”

“Yes,” Cinderella said, her mouth forming an unhappy slant. “Where are you going with this?”

“Why can’t you extend the same sort of forgiveness to the queen?”

“You can’t be serious,” Cinderella said.

“I am.”

“Very well. Then perhaps it is because Erlauf commoners do not trek all over Aveyron, eyeing it greedily. Erlauf soldiers do not lie and steal from me, nor do they blackmail me and press me with such hard fines I will lose everything but my own body and my title. I can forgive them because their actions are forgivable. This queen of yours? She will not rest until I am destitute. For such cruelty, I have no forgiveness.”

“Does a person have to act sorry in order to be forgiven?” Friedrich asked. “I know you have encountered cruelty from others, and yet you forgive them.”

“Why does my attitude towards your queen bother you so?” Cinderella asked, placing her fists on her hips. “Whatever I think about Queen Freja isn’t of great importance. I am not going to rise up against her in rebellion—surely you must realize that. So what does it matter?”

“Forgiveness takes a great deal of personal strength. A weak person cannot forgive, and their actions will keep them captive and fester like an infected wound,” Friedrich said.

Cinderella stared at Friedrich. “What?”

“Of everyone in this rotten country, you, Cinderella, are the nearest to grasping forgiveness. You are so close to bridging the gap between us. Hate cannot drive out hate. As long as those from Trieux hate those from Erlauf, our countries will be in an eternal struggle. If you can forgive us, you will set not only yourself free, but your countrymen as well. I want you to have the courage to forgive. I want you to be the person to save our countries.”

“Friedrich, I am not capable of saving anyone. I can’t even save my own servants. I’m about to lose my lands. I don’t know what hope you see in me, but I am not capable of it,” Cinderella said.

“You are much stronger than you know,” Friedrich said, stepping closer. “You can conquer a country with forgiveness,” he said, lowering his head towards Cinderella.

When he was a hand away, Cinderella covered her mouth with her hands. “Do not even dream of it,” she said, her voice muffled.

Friedrich sighed. “Still not yet?”

“It will be not ever, I suspect.”

“Why not?”

“I said it before. Above all, I will honor my marriage.”

“Even though we aren’t married yet?”

Cinderella removed her hands from her mouth so she could smack Friedrich on the chest.

“If only you could apply this same sort of loyalty towards Erlauf,” Friedrich

grumbled as Cinderella minced away from him.

“If only your queen had a heart,” Cinderella said.

## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

Friedrich gathered up the reins of his horse. “Shall we return to my camp? I will see you home, but I would like to check in with some of my men first.”

“That sounds agreeable,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich caught one of Cinderella’s hands and held it as they walked back to the camp, Friedrich’s horse trailing behind him.

They rounded the corner of the camp and entered the stables.

Two soldiers saw them and violently shook their heads, motioning for Friedrich and Cinderella to backtrack.

“What?” Cinderella said, tilting her head.

“Drat,” Friedrich said.

Out of a stall came an Erlauf officer. He wore a uniform identical to Friedrich’s, but without the eye patch. His hair was a chestnut shade of brown, and he had good-humored, gentle, hazel-colored eyes.

“Friedrich, so you are here. Your men insisted you were out for the day but—,” the man cut off when he set eyes on Cinderella.

The stable was shockingly silent.

The two lower-ranked soldiers looked as though they wished the ground would



swallow them alive. Friedrich wore a dark scowl on his face, and the unknown officer gaped at Cinderella as if she was a three-headed goat.

Cinderella cleared her throat and decided no one seemed prone to introducing her to this stranger, so she may as well do it herself. “Good afternoon, sir. I am Lady Cinderella Lacreux, and you are?”

“Colonel Merrich of the Second Regiment in the Dragon Army,” Merrich said, his voice just as dazed as his expression.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Colonel Merrich,” Cinderella said, performing a sweeping curtsy.

“There’s no need to be nice to him,” Friedrich said.

“What? Friedrich, you wound me! Has he said nothing of me?” Merrich asked.

Cinderella shook her head. “I don’t believe Colonel Friedrich has ever mentioned a Colonel Merrich.”

“Well, this is a fine mess,” Merrich said. “You lied about her beauty, and then you don’t even tell her about me?”

“I said she was exotic. You were the one who decided she must resemble a troll,” Friedrich said, curling an arm around Cinderella’s shoulders.

“I beg your pardon?” Cinderella said, her voice dangerously pleasant as she stepped out of the gesture.

“It was a joke,” Friedrich said. “I did not tell him how breathtaking you are.”

Cinderella looked down at her rumpled dress and ran a hand through her windswept hair. “Oh yes. Breathtaking,” she said, her voice devoid of emotion.

“But you are,” Colonel Merrich said with a charming smile. “I have never before seen hair so red and stunning before in my life,” he said, taking Cinderella’s hand.

He almost brushed it with his lips before Cinderella pulled her hand from his grasp. “I am charmed,” Cinderella said in the same tone one uses to announce the sight of a dead rat. “If you will excuse me, gentlemen. I believe I will go wait in the mess hall until you are ready to leave, Fred,” Cinderella said before making her exit from the stable.

As she left, she heard Colonel Merrich say to Friedrich, “She is a tough one to crack, isn’t she? I understand why you whine and complain so.”

“Thank you for your sympathy.”

“Yes, I figure I ought to share some with you before I kill you for setting me up as the fool. That lady could stop the sun if she smiled. You said she scuttled.”

“I have no idea what you are referring to,” Friedrich said.

Are all Erlauf Colonels so roguish? Cinderella wondered, shaking her head as she made her way to the mess hall.

## Chapter 11

Cinderella sifted through her Father’s office, looking for items she could sell. The office was mostly cleared out from previous passes, but it was best to be thorough and exhaust all possible sources of income.

The curtains and rugs were gone, as were most of the books. The paintings—the first things to go—were long gone, and Cinderella would have sold the desk if she thought the monstrosity could be removed from the Chateau, but it was built inside the study and could not be shifted through the door.

“Mademoiselle?”

“Yes, Jeanne?” Cinderella asked, standing on tiptoe to inspect the books. (The remaining volumes were books of Aveyron’s records and a farmer’s almanac.) “A Royal Messenger arrived,” Jeanne said. “He said to give this to the lady of the house.”

Cinderella took the envelope Jeanne held out to her. She glanced at the royal seal pressed into wax on the back of the envelope before she ripped it open.

“It’s an invitation for the annual victory celebration,” Cinderella said, reading the paper.

“The Victory Ball?” Jeanne asked, naming the event Erlauf royalty hosted in the Trieux Palace every year since the takeover to laud their victory.

“Yes,” Cinderella said, stuffing the invitation back into the envelope. “Please give it to Lady Klara. I will not be attending.”

“As you wish, Mademoiselle,” Jeanne said, curtsying.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:38 am*

When the housekeeper left the room, Cinderella rested her forehead on the bookcase. “It’s not enough that they took us over, they must make a spectacle out of it every year, too,” she muttered before climbing a ladder.

She shuffled the few leather-bound books around the shelves. Nothing new was to be found. Cinderella started to climb down the ladder—intending to search her mother’s old room next. She looked up at the top of the bookshelves, and, on an impulse, climbed the highest ladder rung.

The bookshelves did not reach the ceiling, but they still stretched up a good ten feet. The ladder was barely tall enough to push Cinderella above their height, so she might see if anything of interest was on top.

The tops of the elaborately carved shelves were dust-covered and riddled with cobwebs, but Cinderella was rewarded with a package of papers.

Cinderella brushed cobwebs from the package, shivering at their whispery touch, and carried it down the ladder with her.

She wiped the package off and sneezed in the raised dust before ripping the packet open. Papers spilled out. Cinderella recognized her father’s handwriting on the aged, yellow sheets. It was some kind of proof of sales based on the various seals and notaries pressed into the brittle pages.

“What is this?” Cinderella murmured, moving to the window so she could see better.

The paper went on, but Cinderella couldn’t believe it. Her father had purchased

another manor? When? Was he out of his mind? Cinderella paged through the reports. Her blood turned cold when she saw where Windtop Manor was located: southern Loire.

According to the dates, the purchase was made in the chaotic but brief month Trieux was at war with Erlauf before it was overtaken.

Cinderella's father hadn't claimed the manor in his assets—Pierre and Cinderella would have noticed it before—and the Erlauf Crown wasn't likely to let an out-of-country manor go untaxed, even if it was in Loire.

Cinderella bit her lip as she tried to keep the hysteria down. There was only one reason Cinderella could think of that would drive him to purchase a small manor—incredibly small compared to Aveyron—in Loire.

He meant to flee.

With only fifty acres to its name, Windtop could not possibly provide work for Aveyron's fleet of servants. He meant to abandon everything and run. Cinderella knew without a doubt he would have taken her with, but it didn't change the fact that her brave, gentle father engineered a backdoor to escape through.

However...Cinderella could sell this escape plan—surely it was worth the remaining amount of debt Aveyron owed the crown. (This explained the unpaid landholding fines—the money was gone, already used to pay for part of Windtop's purchase, rather than pay off the debt.) Hope toppled as Cinderella realized the position she was in. She could sell Windtop...and then Queen Freja just might have her imprisoned for embezzlement or whatever word she could use to brand Cinderella a traitor for failing to inform the Crown of the foreign manor.

If she didn't want to be imprisoned, Cinderella's only option was to ignore it...or use

it.

Marie told Cinderella she needed to start thinking of herself, she should be selfish just this once. Once inside Loire, Erlauf could not touch her. She would have to leave behind the servants...but hadn't she paid them back for their loyalty?

To never be harassed, to never be bothered again by Queen Freja...Cinderella was still as she imagined the freedom for a moment.

If Papa planned for it, surely it couldn't be wrong, Cinderella thought. Papa was the kindest man I know. If even he made these preparations...

Cinderella recalled the way her servants dove into flower farming, even though they must have thought she was half mad to try it. She thought of Vitore—the stand-minder who was originally a lady's maid. There was brave Jeanne, who might not be the warmest person, but who had said no to a suitor to step into her mother's position of housekeeper when she died. Gilbert, who stayed on even though his wages were lowered. The cowherds, who learned how to tend sheep when Cinderella was desperate for help and unable to afford more. All of Aveyron's servants hadn't just stood up for Cinderella and her father when Erlauf rounded up the nobles for the slaughter, they stayed with Cinderella and sacrificed more.

"I can't leave them," Cinderella said, her grip tightening on the papers. "I can't abandon them."

Cinderella squared her shoulders. There was one final option. It would be a gamble, but to sit on Windtop and have no intention of using it while losing Aveyron was a waste.

Cinderella gathered her wits and strength before she set off down the hall, steeling herself for rejection and ruin.

She stopped outside a polished door and knocked.

“Yes?”

“It is me, Step-Mother.”

“Come in.”

Cinderella took a deep breath before she opened the door and stepped into the private parlor her Lady Klara occupied. “Good afternoon, Step-Mother,” she said, bobbing in a slight curtsy.

“Good afternoon,” Lady Klara said, her voice as feeling as ice. “What brings you into my presence?”

“I need your help.”

Lady Klara looked up from her tea. “...With?”

Cinderella handed the registry of sales to the stately woman. Lady Klara skimmed the papers, her mouth twisting the longer she read.

“I want to sell it to pay off Aveyron,” Cinderella said. “It is only a small manor, but since Trieux is no more, Loire real-estate has climbed higher than ever. The buying price should be enough to cover Aveyron’s debt.”

“But?”

“Papa didn’t claim it in his assets. If I claim it now I may be jailed.”

“I see,” Lady Klara said, setting the paper on her lap. “Why have you come to me with this problem?”

“Because I have no one else,” Cinderella said, holding the woman’s gaze.

Lady Klara nodded, accepting the truth in the statement, but said nothing more.

“Please,” Cinderella said, her heart tightening. “I don’t know what to do.”

If Lady Klara wouldn’t help, she would turn Cinderella in. Her future depended entirely on Lady Klara’s reaction.



The Erlauf woman studied the papers again, and Cinderella's mouth went dry.

"I will claim it as mine," Lady Klara said.

Cinderella blinked. "Pardon?"

"As an Erlauf widow—with a low-ranked title and no landholdings—any income taxes I accrue will be significantly lower than what you—the Duchess of a profitable chateau—would encounter. After the taxes are paid, you can use the remaining amount to pay your debts."

"How can you claim it?" Cinderella asked.

"I did marry your father," Lady Klara wryly said. "You inherited everything to do with Aveyron. It is not entirely ridiculous that he would will a small manor to me, provided you agree with my story."

"And they will believe you?"

"Unless they are cads, no. I am of Erlauf heritage, your Father of Trieux. However, if you support my word as his heir, there is nothing they can do to prove otherwise."

"Won't they be angry with you for withholding the inheritance?"

"My husband was a slain war hero, and even after his death I followed my orders and married again, an enemy even. Queen Freja will not arrest me, if that is your concern," Lady Klara said with great firmness.

She's going to help me? Cinderella wondered as she stared at her step-mother. The surprise numbed her body, and she felt slack-jawed.

“You look surprised,” Lady Klara said, folding her hands in her lap.

“I am surprised,” Cinderella said.

Lady Klara sipped her tea and rearranged the papers.

“Why are you doing this?” Cinderella asked.

Lady Klara arched a formidable eyebrow. “It was you who requested my help, Cinderella.”

“Yes, but I didn’t think you would actually give it,” Cinderella said, the words spilling out of her mouth. She hesitated, wondering if she should apologize, before she tucked her head. No, this was important.

“In spite of what you may believe about those of us from Erlauf, I am not entirely unfeeling, Cinderella,” Lady Klara said.

“I have been haunted by debts. I have looked to you for help before, but this is the first time you will give it.”

“Perhaps that is because I could not help you before,” Lady Klara said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t think you understand just how wealthy you are.”

“...Is that a joke?” Cinderella said. Confused and as hopeful as she was, Cinderella felt so overwhelmed she grew angry. “I have beggared myself and lost most of my possessions to keep this duchy going. I am on the verge of losing it, and you call me wealthy?”

“Aveyron is twice, no, three time the size of the largest Erlauf estate. Queen Freja has taken so hatefully to you because you are the sole Trieux estate that has lost not a single acre, servant, or animal. If your father was alive and Duke of Aveyron, I very much doubt she would attack you with the same vigor.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your father would have sold parts of Aveyron to keep his personal comforts.”

“My father was a kind and generous man!” Cinderella said, her eyes flashing.

“He was, and yet he bought a manor in Loire which you—dressed in a servant’s uniform—stand before me, desiring to sell so you may keep your estate.”

Cinderella was silent.

Lady Klara stood, her chin lifted as she fixed her eyes on Cinderella. “Once Queen Freja finishes giving land and titles to army officers, you will own more land than the Erlauf royal family. She fears you, because you have done what no one else has—in Trieux or Erlauf, for we in Erlauf have also been hit with taxes—has done. You are extraordinarily wealthy, just as you are extraordinarily stubborn, Cinderella.”

Cinderella stared at the floor. “I just want to keep all my servants,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“Of this I am aware, which is why I will help you—though my husband must be rolling in his grave,” Lady Klara said. “But as I have neither finances nor influence, this is the only way I can help you: by lending you my name.”

Cinderella raised her gaze to rest it on Lady Klara. What had Friedrich said? Only the strong could forgive. As Cinderella stood before Lady Klara—the widow of an Erlauf war hero—it occurred to her that Lady Klara must be a very strong individual.

“Thank you,” Cinderella said, the words falling short of everything she meant to say.

Lady Klara raised her shoulders in a minute shrug. “Make the arrangements to meet with a financial officer, and I will go with you to make the claim,” she said, strolling over to a window.

“I’m sorry,” Cinderella said.

“For?”

“For the war, for your losses, for judging you without mercy.”

“Don’t be silly, child. You were just a girl. You cannot be held responsible for any of those things,” Lady Klara said.

Cinderella shifted.

“But, Cinderella,” Lady Klara said, turning from the window. “Please consider carefully what you will do with your power.”

Cinderella swallowed. “Yes, Step-Mother,” she said, curtsying before she left the parlor.

Her mind spun, and Cinderella had to lean against a wall after she shut the door. It was too much to take in. Her Step-Mother was helping her. Queen Freja targeted her because she would not sell or downsize...

“What about my marriage?” Cinderella murmured. “Does Queen Freja not realize when I marry I will be forced to sell Aveyron? No one else shares my scruples in selling.”

Cinderella pushed the thought from her mind. It was more than she could handle at the moment.

“First I must make the arrangements to pay off the debt. I will free Aveyron from this financial mountain,” Cinderella vowed.

Cinderella sweated as the government official handling Aveyron’s debts—Lord Diederick—studied the sales bills and receipts for Windtop Manor. It puzzled Cinderella that a titled Erlauf Lord served in the government. Moreover, why was he in charge of debt collection? If there ever was a less glamorous government position, Cinderella certainly hadn’t heard of it.

“You claim Duke Eugene Lacreux willed this to you, Lady Klara?” Lord Diederick asked, looking at Lady Klara over the wire rims of his eyeglasses.

“Yes,” Lady Klara said, her voice stiff.

“And have you proof of this?”

“Only my word, and his heir’s agreement.”

“Hmph,” Lord Diederick said, returning his attention to the papers.

Cinderella discreetly shifted in her summer dress. She did her best to look assured and slightly bored, although she wanted to wring her hands nervously.

Lady Klara looked as unmovable as a boulder, which is to say not at all different than her usual expression.

“It appears to be legitimate,” the young lord finally said, pushing the papers aside. “The crown will hold the deed to Windtop Manor until it is sold to pay Aveyron’s debts, if that is what you wish to do with the funds you receive from the sale, Lady Klara?”

Cinderella waited with baited breath.

“Of course,” Lady Klara said.

“Very well,” Lord Diederick said. “There will be an inheritance tax, as this property was not previously reported,” he said, leveling his heavy gaze at Lady Klara and then Cinderella. “And after that, a sales tax. If it is priced reasonably, the sale will pay off Aveyron’s debt and have a small amount remaining, which will naturally go to Lady Klara.”

“I beg your pardon, there will be some left?” Cinderella frowned.

“Indeed,” Lord Diederick said.

Cinderella shook her “How can that be? Is the debt not...” she trailed off when Lord Diederick showed her a scrap of paper.

“This is the remaining debt,” he said.

Cinderella stared at the number. The Sun Skips canceled a portion of the debt, but Cinderella knew exactly how much she paid off. The number Lord Diederick showed her was incorrect.

Cinderella frowned. As much as the smaller debt would delight her, the last thing she needed was Queen Freja harping at her again in several years for failing to pay the entire debt. "I believe there may be a mistake," she said.

"There has been no mistake. Over the past few days dozens of individuals have trooped through my offices, reducing Aveyron's debt with copper and silver coins," Lord Diederick wryly said.

"What?" Cinderella said, her forehead wrinkling.

"A stable boy was the last to come. He left not an hour before your arrival after depositing five copper coins against your debt. A fellow named Gilbert was the first to make a payment, I believe," Lord Diederick said, rustling papers.

Cinderella lost the stiffness in her spine and leaned back in her chair. She stared at the ceiling, doing her best to keep from crying.

Her servants, Aveyron's employees, were paying off the debt.

"Is everything alright?" Lord Diederick mildly asked.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“She is fine, just feeling a bit peckish,” Lady Klara said with her usual lack of audible compassion. “Must you retrieve a supervisor to approve the debt payment plan?”

“No. My word is more than plenty,” Lord Diederick said, perhaps a little affronted.

Cinderella closed her eyes, barely listening to the conversation. She felt ashamed. To think she considered fleeing to Windtop, even if it was for a brief moment. I don’t deserve their loyalty. I have done nothing to warrant it.

“Cinderella, your signature as witness is required,” Lady Klara said.

Cinderella bit her lip and pushed the feelings aside. “Yes, I apologize,” she said, discreetly brushing tears from her eyes before she fixed a pleasant smile on her face. “Where do I sign?”

“Here,” Lord Diederick said. “Read the agreement before signing.”

Cinderella did as he advised and saw nothing alarming. In fact, to her surprise, Lady Klara noted that any surplus profit from Windtop would be used against Aveyron’s land tax.

“You will hold all paperwork pertaining to Windtop Manor?” Cinderella asked.

“Until it is sold, yes. Strictly speaking, the fine will not be collected until after the sale. Holding the deed will assure the crown of future compensation.”

“How fast must Windtop Manor be sold?” Cinderella asked.



Lord Diederick tapped a spot on the paper. “You have one year. If it fails to sell in that time, the crown will seize Windtop itself as reimbursement for the debt.”

“That seems reasonable,” Cinderella said. She hesitated a moment longer before she signed the document, freeing Aveyron from Queen Freja’s grasp.

“Thank you for your valuable time, Lord Diederick,” Lady Klara said, standing.

“Of course, it is my pleasure to assist you,” Lord Diederick said, pushing away from his enormous desk so he could stand and bow.

“I’m sure,” Lady Klara said before she curtsied. “I will see you at home, Cinderella.”

“Yes, Step-Mother,” Cinderella said, following her out of the room.

“Duchess Lacreux,” Lord Diederick called.

Lady Klara forged ahead, heedless of the call, but Cinderella paused in the threshold of the lord’s office. “Yes?”

“I am glad your financial situation is resolved,” Lord Diederick said. “I am a close friend of Colonel Friedrich’s. He was...concerned for you.”

“I see. In that case, I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Lord Diederick,” Cinderella said.

Lord Diederick bowed again. “The pleasure is mine. In the future, I hope to see you for less...personal circumstances.”

Cinderella awkwardly nodded. “I agree,” she said, not certain if she meant it. “If you will excuse me, Lord Diederick.”

“Certainly. Good day to you, Lady Lacreux.”

“Good day, Lord Diederick.”

“So, she is free, now,” Diederick said. “For better or for worse, she has squirmed out from the pile of debt and is influence free,” he said before tossing back the rest of his drink.

Merrich leaned forward to avoid the exuberant jubilation of three farmers seated at the table behind him. “You are giving her quite a long leash. Is that wise?”

“I don’t want her leashed at all,” Friedrich said. “I want her free.”

“That sounds terrifying,” Merrich said.

“It is,” Friedrich said, tracing the rim of his tankard with a thumb. In spite of the uproar in the pub—everyone in the room was drunk or halfway there, excluding Friedrich and his friends—Friedrich retained an aura of intense clarity. “But I want her. And if we’re all to survive this, the country needs her free. I can’t hold it together, not with my duties in the Army. She must be the one to do that.”

“So the Veneno Conclave representatives had nothing helpful to say, I take it?” Diederick asked.

Friedrich shook his head and scratched at his eye patch. “They spoke not at all of the magical mishaps taking place worldwide. The Conclave is scared—you can see it in the way the representatives avoid speaking of the sudden outbreak of cursed royalty and the increase in sightings and skirmishes with dark creatures and users of black magic. I think the Conclave means to ignore the problem because they cannot solve it, and they are terrified to admit it.”

“How can they ignore it? Even if one excludes the creatures, it is indisputable that the royal class is under attack. Prince Severin—restored as he may be—was attacked in his family’s palace and cursed there. There are the twelve princesses of the south no one can seem to cure, and aren’t we still waiting to see if the Sole princess cursed to sleep will slide through her birthday?”

“If the representatives refused to talk about the dark tide of magic, what did they speak of?” Diederick asked.

“A lot of pretty things, but mostly they communicated their unhappiness with us for taking over Trieux,” Friedrich said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Merrich frowned and didn't react when the wall next to him was soaked with beer after a tipsy blacksmith threw his mug at the wall. "They're supposed to be impartial. Can they legally say those kinds of things?"

"Who is going to take them to court?" Friedrich asked. "No one from Trieux will bother, and Erlauf is tapped out of funds and scurrying to pay back our debts to the penny-pinching princess of Arcainia."

"I thought she and her brothers disappeared," Diederick said. "Another victim of a dark curse?"

"She did, but her underlings keep her monetary empire running in her absence. In truth, we shouldn't have borrowed so much from her to go to war against Trieux. It made the short war possible, but we're paying for it dearly," Friedrich said.

"And now we sit with a debt-riddled country; the only council of magic users in the world is upset with us; and our conquered territory persists in trying to rip away as we brace ourselves for a decade of dark magic," Diederick summarized.

"If Trieux separates, it is going to be eaten by darkness," Merrich predicted.

"And we will be two steps behind them," Friedrich grimly said. "We are spent. Even a military as grand as ours cannot fight without money to fund it. It is why we are so desperate to encourage Trieux's healthy economy."

"And all of this rests on the shoulders of your lovely red-haired lady," Diederick said as a barkeep refilled his tankard. "Are you certain you want to trust her with the

future of her country and ours?”

Friedrich tapped his fingers on the table. “Cinderella is special.”

Merrich rolled his eyes, and Diederick chugged his drink.

“I’m not being a cad—I mean it. She has a capacity for loyalty and love one doesn’t often see. People want to love her. If she would give up on her last shard of bitterness...I don’t think even a dark enchanter would dare tangle with her. Her love can get people to think beyond themselves. And that is what we need in this age,” Friedrich said.

The three friends were silent, dwelling on Friedrich’s words.

“I’m in,” Merrich said, slamming his drink down. “If she’s as great as you say, I will march to her orders until the day I die.”

“Thank you, provided you don’t get any funny ideas about her,” Friedrich said, eyeing his old friend.

Merrich rolled his eyes again. “I assure you I can control myself from accosting the love of my closest friend.”

“Diederick?” Friedrich asked.

“She’s not ready yet,” Diederick said. “She doesn’t see the danger of dark magic. It hasn’t touched Trieux, even though we’ve been getting hit with it in Erlauf.”

“Then you have to trust she will be ready. I can’t delay a formal engagement much longer. A Trieux brat will pull her out from underneath me,” Friedrich said.

Diederick studied his friend. “You would marry her even if you didn’t think she was the best option for our country, wouldn’t you?”

Friedrich shrugged. “I love her,” he said.

Diederick nodded. “In that case, I, too, will throw my lot in with you.”

“I never pictured you as a champion of love,” Merrich said.

“Hardly,” Diederick said. “But I would not wish a loveless marriage on Friedrich.”

Friedrich clasped his friend on the back. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“Now the only thing left to do is to propose. Again,” Friedrich frowned. “I hope she takes me seriously one of these times.”

“You mean you’ve already asked?”

“At the beginning of the summer.”

Merrich laughed. “Cheers, to our whipped Prince. May you finally get the girl you dream of—who also keeps you in your place.”

“Cheers,” Diederick said.

“I am so touched,” Friedrich flatly said.

The friends laughed and talked late into the night, advising Colonel Friedrich—or as his Royal name decreed, Prince Cristoph Friedrich VI—and hoping he made a wise

decision in loving a fiery Trieux duchess.

## Chapter 12

The morning of the Victory Ball, Julien Rosseux called on Cinderella.

“Julien, what a pleasant surprise,” Cinderella, awkwardly wiping her hands on her apron.

“Lady Lacreux,” Julien said with an extravagant bow.

“Please, just Cinderella,” Cinderella said before turning to her servants, who were packing up the last of the goods for the market. “Leave without me if you must, Vitore. I will be along later.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle,” the maid curtsied before she climbed into the wagon.

Cinderella returned her attention to Julien and concentrated on being a good hostess.

“Would you like any refreshments? Tea, perhaps?”

“No, but I thank you for your offer,” Julien said, folding his hands behind his back as they sauntered up to the chateau.

“May I ask what brings you to Aveyron?” Cinderella asked, tucking a strand of scarlet hair behind her ear.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“I wanted to see you,” Julien said. He looked handsome in the morning light with dove gray breeches, a simple white shirt, and black vest. Typically he wore something more fashionable, but the simplicity of the outfit seemed to fit him better.

“I am honored and delighted,” Cinderella said, leading him around the perimeter of the chateau. “How is your sister?”

“She is well. She was disappointed she did not get to see you beard Lady Feautre.”

Cinderella grinned. “Cerise is a girl after my heart.”

“She seems to think so too,” Julien chuckled.

They reached the chateau’s entrance, but Julien seemed oddly unwilling to go inside. “Cinderella,” he said, looking at her with unusual directness. “My family does not know I am calling on you today.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, they think I have gone for a long ride. A very long ride.”

“I see. Then you have something you wish to discuss,” Cinderella said, knitting her fingers together and standing with picturesque elegance—as she was trained to stand what felt like a lifetime ago, before the war.

“I am aware it is not entirely polite but...I felt you might appreciate a frank discussion.”



“Ah,” Cinderella knowingly said. “Marriage?”

Julien nodded and looked awkward.

Cinderella smiled, taking pity on the young man. “Then let us walk as we talk,” she suggested.

Julien’s shoulders drooped in relief before he offered her his arm.

Cinderella took it, and the two walked across the picturesque lawn, ignoring the loose goats that grazed there.

“What about marriage do you wish to discuss?” Cinderella asked.

“I wanted to see if my assumption is correct, and you will not be marrying Marcus Girard,” Julien said. “It seemed at the dinner party you made up your mind...”

Cinderella sucked in a deep breath of air. “You assumed correctly. I don’t think...Marcus is young, and I suspect if we leave him alone he will seek out Cerise’s hand.”

“So your only option, then, is me,” Julien said.

Cinderella looked up at the young nobleman and was struck by a sudden thought. “Julien, do you want to marry me?”

Julien blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“You cannot possibly love me, although I flatter myself in thinking you are fond of me. Do you want to be tied to me for the rest of your life?”

Julien hesitated. “I am fond of you, and I feel we can learn to be happy.”

“That does not answer my question,” Cinderella said as they stopped and faced each other under the shade of a giant oak tree.

“Out of all the available girls of Trieux noble lineage, you are the one I prefer and prize. Yes, perhaps we do not love each other now, but there are things about you I admire...” Julien trailed off, cowed into silence by Cinderella’s narrowed but not unkind gaze.

Cinderella recognized the careful words that she, too, had dwelled on the past few weeks. “There’s a commoner you love, isn’t there?” Cinderella said Julien gawked.

“You’ve been very careful to say I am your favored choice out of all suitable. There is nothing wrong with that—I agree with you, actually. However, there are many, many other girls in Werra, much less in the country, who would not meet your parents’ requirements but are still perfectly lovely.”

Julien was incapable of speech and made a gurgling sound.

Cinderella patted Julien on the arm. “What is her name?”

“Margrit.”

It took all of Cinderella’s control to keep from gaping. “She is from Erlauf?” Cinderella said, recognizing the harsher syllable patterns of the tyrant country.

“Her father is a secretary for the queen. I met her at the palace,” Julien said. “She is charming and sweet. Her laugh is like the chiming of a bell,” Julien said, his voice wistful.

“And you love her.”

Julien hesitated. “Yes. But I am a man of honor. When we marry, I will see her no more,” he firmly said.

“Why would you marry me when you love another?”

“My parents know nothing of her, and my father would disinherit me if he heard of it. The only reason he still presses me to marry you—in spite of your association with Erlauf soldiers—is to keep our bloodlines pristine.”

“Julien, a marriage based on your parents’ desires will be wretched,” Cinderella said.

Julien shrugged. “Even if they did not force me to, I would still choose you,” he said, his layers of good manners fading to honesty. “You are alone, and you cannot hold on to Aveyron much longer. I cannot stand by and watch you fail. If it is in my power to aid you, I will. Unfortunately, all I can do is offer to marry you.”

Cinderella stared at Julien, struck by the nobility of his soul. He would put aside his personal desires and marry her just because she was in trouble.

Cinderella smiled at Julien, affection flowing from her, making Julien aware of what a beauty Cinderella was beneath the servant’s uniform and the dirt.

“You are a good man, Julien,” Cinderella said, resting her hands on Julien’s. “I thank you for your selfless offer.”

Julien tilted his head. “But?”

Cinderella’s smile turned gentle. “But I will be daring enough to set both of us free. I will not marry you, even if it is the easiest way of survival.”

“Are you sure?” Julien asked.

“We deserve happiness. Both of us. I may struggle longer, but do not fear. I will seize personal happiness if I must shake it from Queen Freja with my bare hands,” Cinderella said.

The comment drew a chuckle from Julien, making him less strained. “But what will we do? My father will never let me marry Margrit, and Aveyron...”

“Aveyron is my concern. If I drive myself to ruin, it will be through my own stubbornness—from which you cannot save me,” Cinderella wryly observed. “And I understand your concerns with your father...but do you really think he can spare you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You are his only son, and while I love Cerise, she would make a poor heir. Your father knows this. We are in an unfortunate time because of the financial burdens and stresses placed on us, but we are also in the perfect time, because in such uncertain days as these, we can change and defy traditional thought patterns and beliefs,” Cinderella said.

“What do you mean?” Julien asked.

“Forgive my impertinence, but when else in history could a duchess wear servant clothes and work in the market without worry of alienation from her fellow nobles?”

“Or when would a duchess condescend to even think of marrying the son of an earl?” Julien said with a smile.

“My point is your father doesn’t have anyone else who will see to your estate. He will likely yell at you and be enraged with you for a few months, but I think he will come around.”

Julien nodded. “Mother will cheer for me, I think.”

Cinderella nodded. “Perhaps.”

Julien smiled widely, without restraint. It startled Cinderella to realize she had never seen Julien look so happy before. “But what of you, Cinderella?” Julien said after a few moments, his smile dimming.

Cinderella shrugged. “I have survived these two, soon to be three years. Every time I think I am at the end of my rope, I find I have just a little more strength. I am stubborn and wild. Queen Freja cannot hope to beat me,” Cinderella said.

“Will you marry your Erlauf officer, then?”

Cinderella pressed her lips together. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Why not? You must care for him seeing as you stood against our peers for the sake of your association with him.”

“I’m not entirely certain what he feels for me. He mostly seems to be serious, but there are things he says...” Cinderella shook her head. “I don’t know, but even if I do not marry him, I will be quite happy at Aveyron.”

Julien nodded.

“Aren’t we a pair,” Cinderella laughed. “Once lauded as the sparkling future of the remaining Trieux line of nobility, we are both infatuated with the enemy.”

“They aren’t really the enemy. Not anymore,” Julien earnestly said.

“Mmhmm. I do not think the whole country, or even a sizeable portion of it, would agree with you,” Cinderella said.

“Perhaps not, but when they see that we can intermingle—if, no, when I marry Margrit—changes will come ‘round. They already have. Thanks to your friendship with Colonel Friedrich, you are a beautiful example of noble decorum.”

Cinderella looked down at her patched dress. “Oh yes,” she said in a dead voice. “I can see I am in a very pretty spot right now. Hah-hah.”

“You solely look at your outward appearance,” Julien argued. “I can assure you, in the people’s eyes, you wear a crown and jewels.”

“I think you are overestimating me, but I thank you for the compliment all the same,” Cinderella said. “Now, tell me of this Erlauf miss of yours.”

“He waxed poetry over her gentle manners and soft voice. With all the sweet and kind descriptions he used, I half wonder if this girl is a kitten. Truly, Marie, I think he would have been miserable with me. I am too wild and passionate for him,” Cinderella said.

Marie scowled at Cinderella. “You’re just trying to convince me you’ve done the right thing.”

“Perhaps.”

Marie sighed. “I doubt poor Julien would have learned to say no to you. But if you ruled out Marcus, turned Julien away, and discounted Colonel Friedrich—,”

“My life will be complete even if I do not marry in the next year, Marie,” Cinderella said.

“I know, but it is such a shame. I mean, Colonel Friedrich is deliciously handsome.”

“Marie! You are married!”

“Yes, but that does not mean I am not shallow for your sake,” Marie said with a wicked smile.

Cinderella rolled her eyes in exasperation.

“What will you do?”

“I will celebrate Aveyron’s momentary freedom before Queen Freja can smack me with another fine,” Cinderella said.

“Wonderful,” Marie pronounced.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Cinderella stood, gathering her basket from its position next to the settee. “Even so, I haven’t the time to slack. I should return to the market.”

“Have you told the Colonel?”

“About Julien?”

“No, about Aveyron being paid off.”

“Not yet. I was hoping to do so soon.”

“Good. I would also mention your settlement with Julien, if I were you,” Marie said.

“Why?”

“Colonel Friedrich strikes me as the...jealous type.”

“He once said something similar. I failed to understand what he meant then, just as I fail to understand your allusion right now,” Cinderella said, tilting her head.

Marie sighed. “You can bet somehow he will hear about the hour you and Julien spent walking, arm in arm, laughing and having an earnest conversation. It will soothe him to hear of the conversation from your lips.”

“If you say so,” Cinderella doubtfully said. “I’m not certain I’ll be able to see him today, though. It is the day of the Victory Ball. Much of the Army has either been invited to the party, or will be guarding it.”



“He will have enough time to talk to you. I promise it,” Marie said.

“I suppose I could stop in the First Regiment’s camp before I return to the market,” Cinderella said.

“Do so,” Marie said, escorting her to the door. “I am happy for you, Cinderella. You are doing well.”

“Thank you.”

“Best wishes in your encounter with the Colonel.”

“I will need it. Farewell,” Cinderella said, embracing her friend before traipsing down the stairs. She set off at a quick walk, humming under her breath as she trekked across Werra.

She walked down small streets, winding through one of the few residential parts of the city. Houses were smashed against each other like fish packed in a crate, but the occupants seemed happy. Housewives met to gossip while doing the day’s wash; children played together in the streets, and a few grandmothers crowded on someone’s porch, mending and darning clothes.

It was mostly Trieux folk who lived in this part of the city, but Cinderella knew three streets up was an Erlauf neighborhood. “I wonder if it looks at all different,” Cinderella said, turning around to look back down the street.

That was how she caught sight of her tail—a bland, harmless looking man. He hadn’t the blonde hair of a Trieux, nor did he have the dark hair of a man from Erlauf. He looked watery, with weedy hair and abnormally dark eyes. The oddest thing about him was his long, black cape and cowl. Fall would soon begin, but the weather was still hot, and the sun shone with enough intensity to make Cinderella sweat.

He stared at her, not bothering to hide his fixed gaze. He moved his arms, pushing back his cloak. Black jewels and rat pelts hung from a chain that swooped across his chest. As he watched Cinderella, he unhooked a black jewel and held it in a fist. He spoke to it, and black vapor rose from his hand.

A chill crawled up Cinderella's spine, and the necklace Friedrich gave her turned as cold as ice.

## Chapter 13

Her instincts kicked in, and Cinderella started running. She shot up the street like a rabbit, shooting between a swarm of playing children and dodging around carts, horses, chickens, and geese.

As she turned a corner, she glanced over her shoulder.

The man in the black cape wasn't moving, but he was less than a block behind her. It was as if instead of running, he was moved to whatever location he desired.

Cinderella ran into another habited neighborhood, casting a terrified gaze around the streets. Where were her guards? Did they not follow her in the city? Cinderella generally didn't bother to look for them when off Aveyron lands.

The First Regiment camp was too far away for Cinderella to reach before the black magic user caught her. She didn't want to leave public sight—but she didn't want to drag any helpless innocents into the fight either.

“Patrol point,” Cinderella huffed, skidding as she planted her feet and started running in a different direction. If Cinderella could reach a central patrol point—where all patrols for the area started and ended—there would be over a dozen soldiers stationed there.

Bless the Army for increased patrols, and bless me for memorizing their routes for library trips, Cinderella thought, risking another glance over her shoulder.

The tail was behind her, but on the corner she just skirted. He looked in several directions, searching for her.

Cinderella vaulted into an empty wagon tied in front of a house, and wriggled beneath a bundle of burlap sacks.

She held her breath and prayed her pounding heart wouldn't reveal her as the black mage walked up the street, moving bonelessly.

His eyes skipped over the wagon, and Cinderella gasped in air when the mage was one street up.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Whatever his magic skills are, they don't include tracking, Cinderella thought as she slithered out of wagon. All the same, I should head to the patrol point and send word to Friedrich.

Somewhere in all the running, Cinderella wound up in the Erlauf neighborhood. Her red hair stuck out among the fair, straw-haired Trieux peasants, but it was more of a flaming beacon among the small scattering of dark-haired Erlauf commoners who walked the streets.

Cinderella crouched low to the ground to minimize the possibility of being sighted and crept along the houses, ignoring the odd looks from the few commoners on the street.

She crouched behind a cluster of barrels and winced. Something cold pressed against the skin of her chest. Cinderella realized it was the dragon necklace Friedrich gave her when he first presented her to her soldiers. She tried to dig it out from under her dress, for it felt like a chunk of ice freezing to her skin, when she heard crying.

Down the street came the black magic user, dragging an Erlauf woman behind him by her glossy brown hair-braid.

The woman sobbed, her face twisted in pain. "Please, let me go," she whimpered.

The necklace forgotten, Cinderella peered at those in the streets. They would help the poor woman, wouldn't they?

The street walkers were statue still, as if carved out of colorful chunks of stone. They

didn't blink, and they didn't move, even when the black mage clenched a dirty hand around the young woman's throat.

The woman struggled, clawing at the mage's hand. She gurgled and coughed as life was choked from her.

If I jump him, he will kill me, Cinderella thought. But if I don't, he will kill her. An Erlauf woman.

The black mage turned, looking up and down the street. He was waiting for her. When Cinderella didn't appear, the mage's fist encased with black vapor, and the woman's frantic thrashings became more like the twitches of a dying animal.

The smell of burnt flesh filled the street.

Cinderella grimaced, and when the black mage turned his back to her, she pushed her way up a narrow stairway that led to the second floor of the shanty she was pressed against.

The black mage lifted the woman off her feet and held her high above his head, showing off his prize.

The commoners on the street didn't react, and everything was still—except for the dying woman.

The black magic user lowered the woman—although he kept his hands fastened around her neck.

She choked, her eyes rolling back as she convulsed, almost dead.

The black mage looked down at the nearly dead woman in undisguised pleasure, so

he did not see Cinderella when she flung herself off the roof of the house directly next to him.

Cinderella landed on the mage with enough force to knock him to the ground. Sitting on top of him, Cinderella grabbed him by the throat of his cloak. She slammed his head into the ground two times before he blasted her with his dark magic, sending her careening into the front door of a house.

Cinderella was up in an instant, even though her ears rang and her sight was fuzzy. If she stayed down she would die. “HELP!” she shouted, her voice loud but shaky.

The nearly strangled woman was frozen like the others. As Cinderella grabbed a pitchfork leaning against the house, she glanced at the woman long enough to be assured she was breathing.

Cinderella charged the mage with the pitchfork. The mage—who seemed to take an abnormally long time to move—barely slithered aside in time to avoid being stabbed. He grabbed hold of the pitchfork—which Cinderella easily released—and tossed it away.

Cinderella had already armed herself with a wooden bucket when the mage turned back to her. She swung the bucket at the mage and clocked him in the skull.

“HELP!” Cinderella screamed again before winding the bucket back for another pass.

The mage shot a stream of his vaporous magic at her. Cinderella dodged, but it brushed her bucket and disintegrated it.

Cinderella tossed the remaining piece of the bucket—the rope handle—away and groped for another weapon. She found a hoe, but the mage bore down on her.

He blasted her with another wave of magic, sending her crashing into the wagon she previously hid in.

Her head lolling, Cinderella groaned in pain. She struggled to keep her eyes open long enough to watch the mage glide towards her, his skeletal hands extended like claws.

He was almost to her when an arrow pierced his shoulder. He made a choking gasp—the first noise he made since the pursuit started—and the black vapor cloaking his hands disappeared.

“N-no,” he muttered, staring at his dirty fingers. Three Erlauf soldiers were on him in an instant. Two secured his arms and a third smacked what looked like a seal drawn on a piece of parchment on the mage’s chest.

The paper clung to the mage’s clothes, and the mage howled. “No!”

The mage thrashed, but the soldiers secured his legs and arms with shackles.

“I apologize, Your Grace; we were nearly too late,” Ivo said, helping Cinderella stand.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

The other two soldiers held the mage in place and smacked him with more paper seals.

“Hold him still. I want this arrow out whole,” one of the soldiers said to the other before yanking the arrow out of the mage.

The mage howled and dripped black blood on the street as the soldier nodded in satisfaction.

“Perfect,” the soldier said, wiping the arrow clean before sliding it the quiver hanging from his back.

By this time, the people on the streets started to move again. Several of them rushed to help the wounded woman. They crouched by her side, bunching around her like a flock of birds.

“Ivo, I have never been so glad to see you,” Cinderella said as the gruff soldier steadied her.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Ivo said before turning to his squad mates. “We need to get that animal into custody and take Lady Lacreux to the regiment camp immediately.”

“I’ll signal another squad,” the soldier with the quiver said as he retrieved his bow from the street. He moved up the road, blowing a silver whistle attached to his uniform.



“Bring a physician, too,” the soldier restraining the mage said.

“And get back fast,” Ivo called after him. “I want this scum out of Her Ladyship’s presence.”

“Do you need a hand?” an Erlauf man said. His voice was deep, and he was about as wide as an ox. He held the pitchfork Cinderella used to try and stab the mage, but he held it with ease and dexterity as he eyed the mage.

Ivo nodded in the direction of the woman. “How is she?”

The man planted the pitchfork and leaned on it. It creaked in distress under his weight as he said, “Alive. Her throat looks burned, but she’s breathin’ fine.”

Ivo nodded.

Cinderella blinked to clear her vision. “Good. I thought I was too late.”

“It was smart, to get the height advantage,” the soldier holding the mage said.

“Thank you,” Cinderella weakly smiled.

“I do not think the Colonel will approve of your engaging the enemy,” Ivo said.

Cinderella pointed her head skyward. “I agree. But Friedrich rarely approves of my actions the way it is.”

“You helped her, lady?” the ox man said, squinting at Cinderella.

“Yes,” Cinderella said. “Ivo, I believe I can stand on my own, thank you.”

“Why?” the ox man asked.

“Why what?”

“Why did you help her?”

Cinderella frowned. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“To save yourself.”

“Well, yes, but I couldn’t just leave her to die,” Cinderella said, gingerly touching the back of her head. “What?” she said when the ox man stared at her.

“You’re from Trieux.”

“Yes.”

The ox man shook his head. He opened his mouth, but before he could further inquire, Ivo interrupted him. “I hear the whistle. Tobias is on his way back,” Ivo said, stepping to help the other soldier, who was anchoring the squirming, bleeding mage in place.

“You’ve lost, mage. Save your strength,” the other soldier said, shaking the mage like a terrier shaking a rat.

“You and every pest like you that approaches the lady will be crushed,” Ivo growled.

The mage laughed, a horrible noise raspy and wet with blood. “I have lost,” he said with a whispering hiss. “But we will not fail. Trieux and Erlauf will be torn asunder. And then they will fester and rot, smothered by their own bitterness and hatred. You all will die,”

“What,” Cinderella said, “are you talking about?”

“Do not engage in conversation with him, Your Grace,” Ivo said.

“Erlauf and Trieux will remain divided, and darkness thrives in division. We will come for you, and this will be our homeland—a land of all things vile and powerful.”

“Division, you say?” Cinderella asked, taking a step closer.

“Your Grace,” Ivo pleaded.

Cinderella ignored him. Her gray eyes raged like hurricanes, hypnotic and furious. “You are lying.”

The mage laughed. “Look to your people! Look to those of Erlauf. You think I am the first to try and kill you? The others didn’t even have magic. Trieux hates Erlauf, and Erlauf hates Trieux. It plays out in your very life. Do you really think that will ever change? War has filled your hearts with hatred. Hatred takes root, and never fails to destroy those who nurture it in their hearts. You are doomed,” the mage broke off.

Cinderella stood tall. The strength of her presence made the mage shift in place. “No,” she said. “If you think I will allow your kind in my country, in Erlauf, you are sorely mistaken.”

“You can do nothing,” the mage protested.

“Really,” Cinderella said, her accent more noble and royal than usual. “Is that why you were trying to kill me?”

The mage fell silent.

“There’s Tobias,” Ivo said, nodding down the street. “ Good. He has an entire squad with him.”

Cinderella turned to look.

The mage snarled and jumped from the soldier holding him captive, lunging for Cinderella.

Ivo shouted, and the mage screamed.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

It was over in the time it took Cinderella to turn around. The mage was dead, speared by the pitchfork-wielding Erlauf man.

“He’s dead,” Ivo said in disgust. “The Colonel will be angry. I’m sure he would have wanted to question him.”

“It was our fault for failing to hold him,” Ivo’s companion soldier said.

Cinderella retreated several steps and averted her eyes from the gory sight. “Thank you, sir,” she said, to the ox-man, her voice shaking.

“He was right,” her rescuer said.

“Pardon?”

The ox-man kicked the dead mage as soldiers trooped down the road. “We hate,” the ox-man said.

Cinderella opened her mouth to reply, but the ox-man continued, “But that doesn’t mean there’s no hope,” he said, turning around to watch the injured Erlauf woman stand unsteadily. “Not when a Trieux lady is willing to risk ‘er life for an Erlauf woman.”

Cinderella smiled wanly. “And not when an Erlauf man risks his neck for a Trieux lady.”

The ox-man bobbed his head, and then the soldiers were on them.

The lieutenant of the squadron and an accompanying captain were riding horses. Ivo picked Cinderella up and tossed her on the captain's horse before she noticed how close the animal was.

"Gather the mage's body. We will meet you at camp," the captain said.

"Yes, sir," Ivo said with a smart salute.

The captain and lieutenant exchanged nods before cuing their horses into a canter. Cinderella clung to the captain and his horse as the city bounced past. There was more than one close call when they almost ran into a wagon or loose animals, but the officers would not slow their pace.

Before Cinderella could believe it, they were riding into the First Regiment's camp. "Attack, attack on Lady Lacreux," the lieutenant shouted.

"Oh, dear," Cinderella said, her stomach gurgling from the crazed ride and the image of the violently killed mage dancing in her mind.

"Have no fear. You're safe now, Lady," the captain said, sliding off his horse before helping her down.

"No, that's not it," Cinderella said, her head swimming.

"Cinderella?" Friedrich shouted. His voice was pinched, and he broke through the ring of soldiers surrounding Cinderella.

"Are you hurt? What happened?" Friedrich asked.

"Friedrich," Cinderella gasped.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, but I think I’m going to be sick again.”

Cinderella was curled like a cat on the thin pallet she had dragged to the spot of sunshine at the window. The heat and light caressed her, driving back the nightmares of the mage attack.

The door to Friedrich’s office opened. Cinderella opened an eye to watch Friedrich duck past Ensign Kurt.

Cinderella yawned and sat up, ringed by a halo of sunlight. “You have questions for me?”

Friedrich crouched down in front of her and placed a hand on her cheek. “Sorry, Pet, but the more we learn, the safer you will be,” he said, leaning forward so his forehead touched hers.

Cinderella pushed Friedrich back with a finger. “There’s not much to tell,” she said. “I left Marie’s and noticed I had a tail—and he wasn’t one of yours. He chased me, and I hid, intending to steal my way to the nearest patrol point. I think it irritated him because that was when he found the Erlauf woman. Somehow, he froze everyone on the streets, and I was the only one available to help the poor woman.”

“So, you attacked him,” Friedrich wryly said.

“Yes.”

“By flinging yourself off a roof.”

“Ivo was proud of me for that part.”

Friedrich held his tongue, but the look he gave Cinderella said he was not impressed.

“Maybe next time I’m attacked I shouldn’t run? I did it automatically—because of the library and everything—but it seems I ran so fast, I left Ivo and his compatriots behind.”

“No,” Friedrich said. “The mage identified them before you came out of Marie’s house and froze them in place. It was good you ran—you took him so far away, they were out of the range of his magic and recovered.”

“Why didn’t the mage freeze me in place as he froze everyone else?”

“I assume he tried, Pet, but because you wear my token of devotion he couldn’t,” Friedrich said.

Cinderella narrowed her eyes. “Friedrich, now is hardly the time—.”

“I’m completely serious,” Friedrich said. “The necklace isn’t a bauble I found in the market. It’s laced with magic.”



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Cinderella dug into the neckline of her dress to pull the dragon emblem out. She studied it with new appreciation.

“It will cancel out any weak levels of magic. The mage’s freezing magic was amateur leveled—one can judge so by the radius around him that he froze. He was usually confined to one city block. Which yes, was enough, but a master mage would freeze at least three blocks, and I would rather not think what a fully credited enchanter could do,” Friedrich said. “The necklace can also neutralize poisons, but to do that you must smear it in your foods and drink first. Your kitchen servants are trustworthy, so I thought it was unnecessary to mention that particular feature to you.”

“Friedrich, this must have cost you a fortune,” Cinderella gaped, staring at the dragon with new appreciation. Magical artifacts of any kind were highly prized, but one that had the power to block magic—even of a low level—never mind the poison, cost as much as a small manor.

“It cost me nothing,” Friedrich said. “Because it is mine.”

“And you’ve been walking around without it?”

“I live with 600 soldiers trained for all types of combat. You live with several dozen servants who have only recently become acquainted with the art of farming. You need it more.”

“But—.”

“Putting the necklace aside, after learning firsthand of the mage’s magic, my men chose to attack him from afar.”

“Ah, yes, with the arrow,” Cinderella recalled. “It must have broken the mage’s concentration.”

“No, it sealed a bit of his power—which gave them time to get closer and completely cut off his magic.”

“Is that what those paper seals were?” Cinderella asked, interested.

“No, you will not be able to produce those to sell,” Friedrich said, correctly interpreting her bright eyes. “It requires a magician with certain strengths to build magic-binding seals.”

“Oh,” Cinderella said, her shoulders slouching.

“They cost a pretty penny,” Friedrich said. “Perhaps it would be worth it to see that the Army employs such a magician. They are scribe magicians—not enchanters—so I suppose it might be cheaper to employ one than buy the seals in bulk through the Veneno Conclave.”

“If they are so expensive, why did my guards have them?” Cinderella said.

Friedrich stood. “Because there have been several attempts on your life. I assumed it was only a matter of time before a dark mage or magician tried his hand at killing you.”

“...What?” Cinderella said. “H-how?”

“Various methods. My men have stopped each attack before it could even begin,

which is why you never noticed.”

Cinderella stood as well, her expression stricken. “Has anyone tried killing you?”

“Of course—,”

“Anyone from Trieux?” Cinderella asked, her voice taut like a harp string tightened too much.

Friedrich rubbed his eye. “It offends people that I cling to you,” he said.

Cinderella sat down on her pallet, dazed. “Then the mage was right. We are divided.”

“Surely that cannot come as a surprise,” Friedrich said. “You have been subjected to scorn because of me, and you seethe with hatred for Queen Freja, like most of your countrymen.”

“But that doesn’t mean I want anyone to kill over it,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich’s expression softened. He again crouched in front of Cinderella and ran a hand through her silky hair. “Sometimes I forget just how good you are,” he murmured.

“Do you feel hate towards Trieux?” Cinderella asked.

Friedrich shrugged. “Why should I?”

“Because you have also made sacrifices for your country,” Cinderella said, placing her finger tips on the Colonel’s black eyepatch.

“Do you mind that I am missing an eye?”

“No.”

“Does having one less eye make me less attractive to you?”

“Friedrich,” Cinderella warned.

“Then, no. I can’t say I mind—now. But you are right. When it first happened, I was quite bitter,” Friedrich said.

Cinderella slumped. “Then the mage was right; Trieux and Erlauf are seeped with hate.”

“The hatred will lessen over time.”

“It’s been three years, Friedrich.”

Friedrich shrugged.

“And the mage. He referred to a ‘we.’” Cinderella said.

Friedrich sighed. “Your brilliance is sometimes a curse. You remember the attempt on my life?”

Cinderella nodded.

“We have learned that the assailants were hired by a mage. The mage was not acting alone. She was a part of something, as far as we are aware, organized under no name or governing system. This force, whoever or whatever it is, seems intent on conquering lands. The royal offspring of many countries have been attacked. Some of them survive and free themselves—as Prince Severin did. Others...We have not seen such wide spread co-operation between forces of darkness since the Snow Queen’s

time and the Enchanters came to power,” Friedrich said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“So, he wasn’t just spouting lies. There is something out there intent on destroying us.”

“Not only us, but other countries as well. So far they haven’t been able to gain a toehold here, but they seem to be narrowing their focus on us.”

“Why? The Erlauf royal family has escaped curses and magic-based attacks thus far,” Cinderella said.

“They are aiming for the royal family, yes, but they also try to stir up unrest in general. We are an easy target not because of the royal family, but due to the bitterness that dwells between our people,” Friedrich said. “Darkness is strongest among black emotions like rage, hatred, and bitterness.”

Cinderella stared unseeingly at Friedrich’s desk.

“Cinderella? Have I upset you?” Friedrich asked.

“No,” Cinderella said. “I am angry with myself. I never thought—I didn’t see any of this. The darkness, the evil.”

“You have been occupied with Aveyron, and it is not your job to wipe out threats to our country.”

“No, but...,” Cinderella sighed. She was quiet for several moments before she shook her head. “I need to think. Am I free to go? I assume you must organize your men for the Victory Ball. It will start soon, won’t it?”

“I don’t want you to leave like this,” Friedrich said. “You are upset.”

“I’m only thinking,” Cinderella said, smiling wanly. “Don’t worry about me; I’ll be fine,” she said as Friedrich helped her stand.

“Do not take this as a personal affront, Cinderella,” Friedrich said. “Our people have chosen this path of destruction. It isn’t your fault.”

“Of course,” Cinderella said, her smile growing stronger.

## Chapter 14

In the early evening hours, Cinderella listlessly sat in what used to be Aveyron’s gardens. She leaned against a functioning bird bath and stared at a blooming wild rose bush that had grown to impressive new heights since the gardener was recruited to supervise crop fields.

What do I do? Aveyron is saved...but if we are attacked...

Cinderella cut the thought off.

“Cinderella?”

“Over here,” Cinderella called.

Mariska, Lady Klara’s youngest daughter, minced her way around the overgrown rose bush. “Mama said to tell you we are leaving for the ball. Our friends have come to pick us up,” she said, smoothing the skirts of her saffron dress. The orange-yellow color complimented her dark hair.

“You look beautiful,” Cinderella said.

Mariska smiled. “Thank you. I have a mask, see?” she said, slipping a mask of the same saffron hue of her dress over her face. It covered her nose, circled her eyes, and was edged with gold beads. “It is to be a masquerade ball.”

“How charming,” Cinderella said.

“Silla insists it is a stupid idea, but I think it is romantic,” Mariska said, removing her mask.

“I am sure you will have a fine time.”

“Thank you, I do hope so,” Mariska said. She awkwardly clasped her mask. “You are certain you don’t want to come?”

Cinderella held in a harsh bark of laughter. “I am certain. Even if I wished to, it is too late now. I don’t have anything to wear.”

“You could borrow something,” Mariska offered. “Although I think your hair would clash with all of my clothes, and I am rather tall...”

“I thank you for your kindness, but I shall have to refuse,” Cinderella said. “Enjoy your evening, Mariska.”

“Thank you. Good bye,” Mariska said, saluting Cinderella with her mask before she hurried out of the gardens.

Cinderella listened to the clip-clop of horse hooves as the carriage Lady Klara’s friends arrived in started on its way.

Cinderella rested her head against the bird bath. “It’s so bleak. This is a war, but our soldiers can’t even see the enemy and have no choice but to remain defensive...”



Cinderella sighed. “And this country...Even if I wish we didn’t hate each other, both sides still exchange insults. Queen Freja strangles money out of us, and then we fester with hate and snarl at her soldiers who then smash us to prevent unrest. The searches, the constant patrols. They wouldn’t be performed if they weren’t necessary. Both sides hate each other too much. I don’t think it can be breeched.”

Cinderella shifted and recalled a conversation she had with Friedrich. It felt like years ago, but it took place only two or three weeks prior.

“You can conquer a country with forgiveness.” He said.

“Erlauf won’t forgive. Queen Freja has proven she will not forgive,” Cinderella said. She looked over her shoulder at the immense chateau. “I have enough trouble as it is. I don’t need to go solving our country’s problems as well.”

Cinderella’s mind was assaulted with the memory of the mage holding the poor, defenseless Erlauf woman above his head, his hands covered with black magic.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“Blast,” Cinderella muttered. “BLAST!” she shouted, making the goats—that were still loose on the lawn—look up at her in wonder.

“Father... what would you have done? Oh, I know—you would have run to Loire,” Cinderella said, her heart still smarting from that revelation. “...Or would you?”

Cinderella sat up, her thoughts racing. Her father bought Windtop Manor in the chaotic month before Erlauf swallowed Trieux into their country. Shortly after the takeover, the mass murdering of the Trieux nobles took place. There was then a few months’ gap before Queen Freja ordered Cinderella’s father to marry Lady Klara.

If her father meant to flee, why didn’t he?

“He bought the manor before our servants saved us. After, maybe he decided to stay,” Cinderella said, excited. Her hopeful smile fell from her face. “Or maybe he just didn’t get the chance to leave,” she said.

Cinderella closed her eyes and recalled her father’s face, his warm smile, and soothing laughter. “Papa wouldn’t have spread hate,” she whispered. “Even when everyone else was taken captive, he said it was our fault for going after Erlauf first.”

Cinderella scrambled to her feet. “I will never know if my father meant for us to flee to Loire and leave our servants behind, or if he had another plan entirely. What I do know is that he wouldn’t want me to stand by and watch everyone be destroyed.”

Cinderella shifted her eyes from the great chateau to the distant city lights. “And if that mage meant to murder me, it must mean that I can challenge this shared hatred.”

Cinderella's mind buzzed like a humming bird as she stalked to the front of her property. There were a million things she had to do, and she had to do them immediately.

As much as the finances pained her, it was time to hire a few Erlauf servants—perhaps people who knew something of flowers and could assist Cinderella's poor, over-worked gardener with future flower crops.

She needed to start hosting again—not the elaborate parties of ages past, but simple and tasteful dinners. She could invite Julien and his Erlauf miss, and Marie and Armel, and whatever officers Friedrich could rustle up. The separation had to end.

Worst of all, she would have to face Queen Freja and her family. “If we have to forgive, that means I must forgive,” Cinderella said through clenched teeth. “This desire, it's too big for me. How can I change a country when my reach is only to Werra?”

“You should have dropped your illusion and attacked her with your regular magic—regulations or not,” a cheerful, grandmother-y voice said.

“I'm already in trouble for using magic in Arcainia. The last thing I need is another broken rule for the Conclave to wave in my face,” said another voice, which was far more youthful and slightly lower pitched.

“Yes, but that wretched queen would be safely dead, and the princes wouldn't be flapping about as barnyard fowl.”

“But I didn't, so our hope rests in Princess Elise. You are sure there is no easy test I can use to sense the strength of her magic?”

“Not with that magic type, dearie. It would take a powerful enchanter to probe her

limitations. Your master could do it.”

“Sybilla.”

“I know, I know. Well here is how I see it: Send Elise to face this Queen Clotilde and stand in reserve. If it looks like she will lose, step in, and use your real magic. Sooner or later, you will have to face it anyway.”

“As you say so. What are we doing here?”

“We’re here to see a girl. My sources tell me the lady of the house had a nasty run in with a mage.”

“A black mage?”

“You betcha. I would like to question her to see what more we can learn.”

The two speakers rounded the corner of shrubbery that shielded them from Cinderella’s sight, and Cinderella felt her breath leave her.

The first speaker—the grandmother-y voice—was a short, squat woman who wore golden wire eyeglasses. She had salt and pepper hair, but it was soft and shiny like a housecat’s fur. She wore a friendly smile, and every part of her plump person leaked comfort and joy.

Her companion was a stark contrast.

The lower pitched speaker was also female, but she was young like a blooming flower and was beautiful enough to steal Cinderella’s breath. Her eyes glittered like brightly polished jewels, her hair looked softer than silk, and she wore an iridescent blue dress, which seemed to turn purple as Cinderella gaped.

“Hello there, dearie,” the grandmother-woman said, flapping a hand at Cinderella.

“You did not tell me you were here to see Duchess Lacreux,” the beautiful woman said.

“I am. How did you know?”

“The Duchess is famous for her scarlet-colored hair.”

“You’ve been tramping across the earth for how long on your doomed quest, and you still can remember that the Trieux Duchess has red hair?”

“It’s a fact I recently learned while I was looking for these,” the beautiful lady said as held a pair of sparkling glass slippers at her companion.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“Seems impractical.”

“I was looking for a mirror. I was told of a ‘magic glass’ in Werra and thought to give it a try. The rumor never added the last word: slippers.”

“I’m sorry, dearie.”

The beautiful woman shrugged. “What can one do? But I am being rude. Duchess Lacreux, please forgive our discourtesy and allow us to introduce ourselves.”

“I am a Sybilla, a First Appraised Isolator Rank Yellow, charged with childcare and development: a fairy godmother.”

“And I am Angelique, an Enchantress-in-training.”

It took every bit of Cinderella’s pre-war training to shut her mouth and curtsy. “Welcome, madams,” she said, her voice calm even though she wanted to scream.

A fairy godmother and an enchantress were standing on Aveyron soil.

Enchanters were the highest magic rank one could achieve, and a fairy godmother was right below it.

“How can I help you?” Cinderella asked.

The fairy godmother adjusted her spectacles and pulled a length of parchment and a full-sized quill out of a pouch the size of Cinderella’s palm. “I was told this afternoon

you had an encounter with a black mage. Could you describe him for me—oh dear,” the woman said when Cinderella’s legs buckled, and she sat down hard on the ground.

“I-I’m sorry,” Cinderella said, trying to push herself to her feet. “Please forgive my—,” Cinderella cast around for the right word in her brain, but she grew distracted when she realized her cheeks were wet with tears.

Horried with herself, Cinderella almost leaped out of her skin when the Lady Enchantress knelt before her. “Do not be alarmed; it is sometimes difficult for a person to be in the presence of magic as powerful as Sybilla’s, even if she is not using it.”

“Speak for yourself, dearie,” the fairy godmother chortled.

“I can tell your heart is pained. What troubles you, Duchess Lacreux?” Angelique asked.

It was the Enchantress’s sympathetic eyes that did Cinderella in.

Cinderella burst into tears. Not soft, quiet, beautiful tears, but loud, snotty ones that made her face red and splotchy. Somewhere between the sobs and hiccups, Sybilla the fairy godmother joined Cinderella and Angelique on the ground.

“There, there, dearie. A good cry is just what a girl needs, sometimes,” she said, patting Cinderella with a plump hand.

When Cinderella’s tears slowed to the occasional trickle, she reluctantly accepted a white lace handkerchief from the Lady Enchantress.

“Now, what has you so upset?” Sybilla asked.

Cinderella swallowed with some difficulty and stared at the handkerchief. “It is as you said. Today I was attacked by a black mage.”

Sybilla nodded. “A run in with one of those brutes is enough to make any lady cry.”

“But that’s not it. I-I didn’t know—or maybe I didn’t see—how Trieux’s hatred for Erlauf and Erlauf’s hatred for Trieux is ruining us. The black mage said we would destroy ourselves, and darkness would rule here. I talked to someone, and he said if we want to survive, our attitudes must change, and our people must change. But I don’t know how.”

“Are you not the only Trieux Duchess, the highest ranked of all remaining nobles?” Angelique asked.

“Yes, but what can I do?”

“My dear lady, forgive me for being blunt, but what can’t you do?” Sybilla kindly asked. “Every person in your beloved country is born with potential to change the world. But you, who desire to spark the change, have been dealt an incredible hand to play. You are a duchess. I have been in Erlauf for just a few days, and even I have heard how you string the Erlauf First Regiment along like a girl leading a lamb.”

“I suspect you are thinking of firepower, Duchess Lacreux,” Angelique said. “You believe you don’t have the power to fight back because you haven’t an army to your name or magic to shield those you love?”

Cinderella nodded. “There are things I can do—things that will affect Aveyron and perhaps Werra. But how can I extend my reach? All of Trieux festers with hate.”

“I believe, Duchess, you underestimate the power of kindness. A gentle word, a smile, an act of compassion, these are the things that can turn hate to love,”



Angelique said.

“Or, if that is your worry, ally yourself with someone who can reach all corners of the country,” Sybilla said.

“Who?” Cinderella asked.

“Queen Freja, of course,” Sybilla said, adjusting her eyeglasses.

“And how will I win Queen Freja to my side?” Cinderella asked, fighting some of her own prejudices.

Sybilla patted Cinderella’s hand. “Dear, it might not be a matter of ‘winning’ her. Have any of you nobles from Trieux tried to talk with her?”

Cinderella was silent.

“Speak to her. She is a brilliant queen, not a tyrant,” Sybilla recommended.

“But how?”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“There is no time like the present. Isn’t there a ball coming up? I nearly drowned in the invitations when the queen learned I was here,” Sybilla said.

“It is tonight,” Angelique said.

“Perfect! There you have it—a ball is a public party. You will freely be able to approach the queen, or at least a member of the royal family,” Sybilla said.

“Yes,” Cinderella said, warming to the subject.

“If the ball is being held now, you ought to go change so you may leave as soon as possible,” Sybilla helpfully added.

Cinderella blinked. “I haven’t any dresses suitable for the occasion. My step-sister said I could borrow something of hers—though she is taller than me,” Cinderella frowned. “I know—I can walk to Werra and borrow something from Marie.”

“Borrow? Borrow? Goodness, no. There will be no borrowing of ball gowns tonight,” Sybilla said, shivering as if the word was dirty.

“Than what am I to wear?”

“I can help you,” Angelique said, standing up. Her dress was spotless and perfect even though she should have wrinkled it while sitting on the ground. “I am a little skilled in alteration magic. If you do not mind the wait, I should have something suitable in a minute or two.”

“In that case, please excuse me, so I may wash,” Cinderella said, shakily rising. She ran to the well and scrubbed at her hands, face, and neck. She poked her head in the kitchen, looking for some of Aveyron’s servants, but they were nowhere to be found.

Cinderella looked through the chateau for a few minutes before she gave up and rushed back to the enchantress and fairy godmother.

“Ahh, there she is,” Sybilla said, clapping her hands.

“Please hold still for a moment, Duchess Lacreux,” Angelique said. She walked a circle around Cinderella, first brushing Cinderella’s chin-length hair.

Immediately Cinderella’s head was heavy with hair as her long, scarlet locks draped to her elbow. As if it had a mind of its own, her hair started moving, braiding small tendrils that pinned themselves to the crown of her head with pearl-topped pins and white roses the size of a thumbnail.

When Angelique touched the sleeve of Cinderella’s dress, the fabric changed to a beautiful shade of snow-white silk. The changed fabric bloomed across Cinderella, rearranging itself as it moved, and grew until Cinderella had a full-skirted dress that brushed the ground. The tops of her shoulders were bare, but a stretch of pale, storm-gray fabric skirted around the top of Cinderella’s dress and glided around the sides of her arms before fastening in the back. A similar shade of fabric gathered at the waist, held in place by a string of pearls.

Gloves the same storm-gray as the highlighter fabric encased her hands and ran up to her elbow. Pearl bracelets appeared on her wrists, and a pearl necklace with a diamond shaped like a heart draped across her chest and fastened itself at the back of her neck.

“It is a masquerade ball, yes?” Angelique asked.

“Yes,” Cinderella said.

“Then you will need this,” Angelique said, brushing her palms together. As she slid her hands apart she revealed a mask—covered with white silk and storm-gray lace—that would cover Cinderella’s nose and circle around her eyes—just as Mariska’s mask did. She handed it to Cinderella, who held it close to admire the lace pattern.

“And for the final touch,” Angelique said, placing the glass slippers she held on the ground.

“I couldn’t,” Cinderella protested.

“Please,” Angelique smiled. “They are not what I was searching for, and I have no use for them.”

“I cannot thank you enough,” Cinderella said, sliding her feet into the shoes. They were surprisingly comfortable—as if made of pillows of water rather than glass. “You have helped me beyond what I could have dreamed of. Is there nothing I can do for you?”

The Lady Enchantress shook her head. “It is the duty of those of us gifted with magic to use it for whatever good purposes we can find. I am pleased I could help you.”

Cinderella shyly brushed the fabric of her dress. “Thank you,” she said, her cheeks turning light pink.

“Now, shall we call for your footmen and carriage?” Sybilla asked, eagerly clapping her hands.

Cinderella smiled uneasily. “I will walk.”

Sybilla blinked. “Walk?”

“Aveyron does not have a carriage, and I cannot use the horses. They have worked all day and are likely to be eating their evening hay.”

Angelique cleared her throat and thoughtfully looked away. Sybilla gaped, her jaw hanging. “No carriage?” she repeated.

“No.”

“Humph. We shall fix that—temporarily at least,” Sybilla said. She turned and studied the goats. “No, but I will be back for you later,” she said to the unconcerned livestock. “Cows—oh goodness no. You can hardly have spotted horses. Sheep? Too stupid. Hmm, I know. Attention, creatures. This young lady is in need of some assistance to reach a ball. Are there any volunteers?”

Aveyron was silent.

## Page 66

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Cinderella shifted her gaze to Angelique to see if this was acceptable behavior for a fairy godmother, when there was scuttling at her feet.

Four clean, well-fed mice scurried across the lawn, stopping in front of Sybilla.

One mouse sat on his hind legs and twitched his nose at Sybilla. The other three mice cleaned their whiskers and occasionally helped pat a neighbor's fur into place.

"Of course, I see. I'm sure she will not object to that," Sybilla said. "In that case, I thank you for your kindness. Now, if you wouldn't mind, be horses."

There was a bang, and a cloud of smoke encased Sybilla.

"Drat! I forgot about that," Sybilla coughed from inside the cloud. "Where are you, mice? Oof!"

When the smoke rolled away, four horses, outfitted in black harnesses, were lined up in front of Sybilla. The horses twitched their noses a little too often, and their fur was the same shiny, well-kept, velvet brown as the four mice, but they took to their new bodies quite well.

"Magic," Cinderella gulped.

"Sybilla's magic," Angelique was quick to add.

"Yoo-hoo! Yes, you two! I need a footman and a driver. What say you?" Sybilla called out to the two nearest goats.

The goats chewed mouthfuls of grass and looked unimpressed.

“How is that for gratuity? Is anyone else more prone to honor than these two pigs?” Sybilla called to the rest of the herd.

An ancient, shriveled buck goat Cinderella kept because she didn’t have the heart to see him slain approached Sybilla with one of the year’s baby goats—a doeling.

The doeling pranced and jumped, leaping over the back of the old goat, who baaed at Sybilla before knocking the doeling in the head with his horns.

“Thank you very much. I assure you the mice won’t be much trouble. I’ve already given them directions,” Sybilla said. “Now, be men!”

Nothing happened.

“Herm. That was embarrassing,” Sybilla said as the goat baaed at her. “I beg your pardon. Be a man and a girl!”

There was another explosion of smoke. When it cleared, an elderly driver dressed smartly in white and gray stood with a young girl who wore gray breeches, a white shirt, and a white hat.

“Very good; you both look grand. If you would stand with the horses, please. Now, a carriage. Duchess Lacreux, have you any pots or apple baskets?”

“Pardon?”

“Never mind. I see a pumpkin patch yonder. It is the wrong season, but with luck, that will make the pumpkin more cooperative,” Sybilla said, striding off towards a field.

She returned some minutes later, a suspiciously round carriage plated in gold rolling after her. The mice-horses arranged themselves in front of the carriage—their harnesses curling into place by magic—while the goat driver climbed into place.

The goat footgirl opened the door of the round carriage, revealing an inside of orange satin.

“I could not get it to entirely agree with me, but no one will see the interior anyway,” Sybilla grudgingly said. “Now, dearie, I am sorry to say it, but this magic will only work until midnight. The mice need to be home by then, and I must confess I need to leave the Werra city limit, and once I do, my magic will cease functioning.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Angelique frowned. “I, too, must be leaving.”

“Off to see that Arcainian princess?”

“Yes. If she can overtake Clotilde, it would be wisest to make our move as swiftly as possible.”

“Smart.”

“Perhaps,” Angelique said before turning her attention to Cinderella. “I will stay in the area with Sybilla until midnight, but on a night as suitable as this for my mount, I really should ride. When I fall out of range, my magic will fade as well. I apologize, but I cannot stay longer.”

“There is nothing to apologize for. I cannot repay you for this,” Cinderella said, gesturing to her clothes and the carriage.

“It was our delight,” Angelique said. “I wish you all the luck I can spare.”



Cinderella shakily smiled. “Thank you.”

Sybilla narrowed her eyes at Cinderella. “Do not be afraid, dearie. Your good cheer has more power than you know. Even your animals know you labor for them. Now, run along. You are fashionably late, but you haven’t much time to spare.”

“Thank you,” Cinderella said, accepting the goat-footgirl’s help into the round carriage. The door closed after her, and Cinderella barely had enough time to push aside an orange, velvet curtain to wave at the magical women before the carriage jolted forward.

Dazed, Cinderella sat back into the satin covered bench. “I’m going to the Victory Ball to speak to Queen Freja,” she said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Her heart pounded in her throat, and Cinderella's mind buzzed. What should she say? What could she say? No one would mistake her for an Erlauf lady, but did everyone know of her brilliant red hair?

"I won't say my name. Not yet. Even if someone in the court does know of my red hair, they must also know I chopped it. Perhaps they will think I wore a wig as part of the masquerade. I don't think anyone will correctly guess who I am. I haven't even met any Erlauf nobility besides when I was presented to Queen Freja as the new duchess."

### Chapter 15

Cinderella felt ill-prepared when the carriage entered Werra. In less time than Cinderella would have liked, the mice-horses pranced to a stop in front of the palace, which glowed with the setting sun.

The carriage door opened, and the goat girl helped Cinderella exit the pumpkin.

The palace entrance was lined with soldiers and guards. Cinderella looked for familiar faces among the men—although she didn't see any—as she climbed the stairs. They did not blink or even acknowledge her presence. They stood stiffly, their swords unsheathed but lowered.

Cowed by the silence and swords, Cinderella followed the burgundy runner rugs that lined the floor and led the way to the ballroom.

As the palace—and thus the ballroom—were built and designed by Trieux, the

architecture was over the top with extravagance.

The ballroom was two levels—the main floor housed swirling dancers and an orchestra. The second floor was nothing more than a balcony that edged the perimeter of the room, although it held over a hundred guests who strolled, murmured, and admired the views from the full-length windows. On both floors, there were patios and terraces made of the finest white marble that allowed attendees to enjoy the cool evening air and afforded them a lovely outlook of the royal gardens.

The ceiling was vaulted and covered with ornate Trieux murals—typically hunting scenes, the Trieux unicorn rearing beautifully, and meadow scenes. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling like glittering webs, and the floor was Trieux blue, made to compliment the night sky and set off the white marble.

The biggest feat of the room was the throne. The Trieux throne was a monstrosity of white and blue marble, set off by Trieux lavender cushions. The throne was placed on a platform created by the merging of three staircases. Two of the staircases cascaded down from the second floor, and the biggest rose up from the first floor to support the smaller two.

Chandeliers, blue curtains, and candelabras were arranged around and below the staircases to make the throne look as if it were rising up out of the stars.

Before Cinderella always thought it was beautiful imagery. Now, a member of the working class and responsible for the livelihood of all her employees, she felt the throne—beautiful as it was—was a tacky show of poor spending.

Queen Freja stood on the platform, some paces in front of the throne as if to distance herself from it.

The two Erlauf Princes stood at the base of the stairs that breeched the first level,

standing in a military style and speaking to those who shuffled forward in the long line, waiting to speak to the queen. The consort was nowhere to be seen.

Cinderella considered joining the line until she caught whiff of the refreshments. “Food,” Cinderella said, abandoning her goal and following her nose.

Tables of food were laid out in a connecting room. There was stuffed cabbage, five kinds of smoked sausage, poppy seed rolls, crepes stuffed with nuts and chocolate sauce, chilled cherry soup, sweet plum dumplings, and many more traditional Erlauf dishes Cinderella did not have a hope of recognizing.

There were also tables of wines, brandies, and beer to consume, as well. None of the food or drinks bore even the vaguest hint of Trieux influence.

Cinderella bit her lip before she sampled a piece of sausage. It was fantastic. So fantastic that Cinderella gathered the courage to try the dishes she did not know. She nibbled on the delicious food, wondering if she could smuggle some home, when she grew aware of someone standing next to her.

A young man dressed in the uniform of a Major bowed when Cinderella finally looked at him. “If you would pleasure me with a dance, Lady,” he said, extending his hand.

Cinderella stared at the soldier.

This wasn’t part of her plan.

Besides Friedrich, she was used to being ignored by males from Erlauf. Why was he asking her to dance? Did she look pitiful?

Cinderella looked nervously around and swallowed the last bit of food she was

chewing—an excellent sampling of cheese. “Of course,” she said, taking his hand and allowing herself to be led back to the ballroom and to the dance floor.

Cinderella tried to study her new companion—wondering if he was one of Friedrich’s men and, thus, had recognized her—but his mask covered at least half his face.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

The Major swept her into the dance—which was, surprisingly, a dance Cinderella recognized as originating in Loire. It was simple, thank goodness. All Cinderella had to do was hold her dress with one hand and the Major's shoulder with the other.

The Major was a competent dancer. He swept Cinderella across the floor, keeping time with the other dancers.

Attempting conversation seemed awkward, so Cinderella allowed herself to be silently guided along. When the song finished, she dipped in an elegant curtsy.

“Thank you for the dance,” Cinderella said.

“Thank you, Lady,” the major said, bowing over Cinderella's gloved hand and kissing her knuckles.

After Cinderella reclaimed her hand she muttered, “Perhaps I have not given Friedrich enough credit. Maybe all Erlauf men are the grabbing type.”

She directed her attention to the line of those waiting to address Queen Freja. The queue curled around the stairs. “Still too long, back to the refreshments,” Cinderella said.

When she turned around, she nearly smacked into an elegantly dressed male.

“I apologize. I did not look to see where I was going,” she said.

“No harm done,” the man—he was perhaps a decade older than Cinderella—said,

straightening his jacket. “Skirts, I have been told, could almost be considered a weapon. Would you care to dance?”

“Certainly, thank you,” Cinderella said, once again allowing herself to be pulled into a dance.

Her second time on the dance floor was slightly more difficult, as it was an Erlauf dance Cinderella rarely took part of. She did not mind the lack of conversation as she focused on moving her feet.

The beat was faster, and by the end of the song, Cinderella knew she was flushed.

“Thank you, Lady, for the wonderful dance. You are very skilled,” Cinderella’s partner said when it was over.

“You are too kind,” Cinderella said, breathing heavily. “But I thank you for the compliment, and for the dance,” she curtsied.

“The pleasure was all mine,” the man said, kissing Cinderella’s knuckles like her previous partner.

Glad she was wearing gloves, Cinderella glanced at the line to the throne—it was still long—before she slipped through the crowd, making her way towards a patio.

“Lady, I beg you to forgive my impertinence, but would you grant me the pleasure of dancing with me?”

Cinderella almost ignored the request—he couldn’t possibly be talking to her—before she realized she was the only one standing near the man—a middle-aged soldier. He looked to be in his late forties or early fifties. It was difficult to guess thanks to his half mask. His uniform was...different.

Cinderella couldn't put her finger on it, but the cut of his jacket was unusual, and he wore no identifying badges or medals.

"Of course," Cinderella said, allowing herself to be led back to the dancers and musicians.

"What do you think of the ball?" her companion asked.

"It is lovely," Cinderella said.

"What do you enjoy most? The dancing?"

"The food. It is exquisite," Cinderella said with feeling.

Cinderella's dance partner released a bark of laughter, drawing glances from some of their fellow dancers.

"I am glad to hear you think so," the man said.

Cinderella noticed that as they swept past a group of soldiers, the men saluted.

Am I dancing with a general?

"The music is skillfully played, of course, and everyone is dressed beautifully," Cinderella added, slightly insulted by the humor he found in her choice.

"And what of the venue?"

"No one can say the Trieux Palace is not grand."

"And the throne?"



Cinderella was silent for a few beats. “It is mostly an eyesore,” she admitted.

The soldier—or in all likelihood, officer—smiled at Cinderella. “It is certainly gaudy. You could feed an army for at least a few months with the funds that monstrosity cost.”

“Or you could buy a year’s supply of seed and hay. Perhaps more,” Cinderella said almost dreamily.

“You seem like you’ve got a good head on your shoulders,” Cinderella’s dance companion said, his voice colored with approval.

“Thank you, sir. I would like to think I do.”

They chatted for a few minutes more, until the dance was over and they parted ways.

“Thank you for the splendid dance, sir.”

“No, thank you, Mademoiselle. You have done me a great service,” the officer said. He bowed over Cinderella’s hand but did not touch it with his lips. He clicked his heels, nodded at her, and disappeared in the crush of the crowd.

Encouraged by the fun, Cinderella once again tried to fight her way to the refreshments. Halfway there, another young man found her and begged her for a dance.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

This pattern continued for some time. Cinderella could scarcely understand her popularity among the men—masked and parading around with the fair skin of a Trieux lady as she was—but she rarely had a moment alone and did not have time to grab more than a few morsels from the refreshments before a new man would request her to dance with them.

After hours of dancing, Cinderella was hot and thirsty. She stole off to the refreshments, doing her best to dart behind ladies with large skirts and men of immense bulk. When she reached the tables of food, she greedily took several pieces of sausage—having discovered she had a fondness for it—and approached the table awash with drinks.

She stood there, trying to decide between a wine or an odd, sweet-smelling juice, when she heard male voices strolling in her direction.

“—barely made it back in time for the ball. My valet was dumping water on my head to get the goblin slime out of my hair as we rode back.”

“How many goblins were there?”

“Three packs—which was an unexpected surprise. We thought there would only be one.”

“Did you lose any men?”

“No. Several were badly wounded though. We left them at the Semonè fortification for medical attention.”

Cinderella chewed her snacks and considered the voices and the implications of their conversation. Goblins moved in packs, but typically the packs didn't group up together due to the petty natures of the creatures. Furthermore, the last time goblins were seen in Trieux was over a century ago. The black mage hadn't lied. Darkness was coming. Wondering who would discuss such a thing at a ball, Cinderella risked a glance over her shoulder and choked on her sausage.

Colonel Merrich and Lord Diederick—both mask-less and grim faced—strolled in her direction, heading for the drinks.

“That was smart of you.”

“Indeed. So, what have I missed? Have any fist-fights broken out?” Colonel Merrich asked.

“The hour is not nearly late enough, and no one has had enough to drink, yet,” Lord Diederick said.

Cinderella thumped herself on the chest as discreetly as possible to clear her throat before she snatched up a glass of the unidentifiable juice, glided—even when hiding, it was not good for a lady to scurry—behind a support pillar, and faced the entrance to the ballroom.

“Have the mothers of eligible daughters hounded you all night?” Colonel Merrich asked, selecting a brandy.

“Not so much. I suspect they were combing the crowds for you. An army officer is a better prize than a lord, after all,” Lord Diederick said.

Cinderella peeked around the pillar. She needed to get out of the room without drawing their notice (as they were quite possibly the only two beings in the room

capable of recognizing her) and, more importantly, she needed to find out what hour it was. Balls could continue until the wee hours of the morning, but Cinderella only had until midnight, and she still hadn't talked to Queen Freja.

"If you are so jealous of my status, you should have ditched the books in school and joined the Army with Friedrich and me."

Content they were absorbed in their conversation, Cinderella started for the door.

At that moment, a young man Cinderella recognized because he had already danced with her three times that evening and complimented her loudly during every dance, entered the refreshments room. He looked back and forth through the room, searching for someone.

Cinderella slid behind a woman wearing an elaborate mask and headdress designed to look like a sun. She couldn't catch the man's eye, or he would loudly greet her, drawing attention to them.

She could still hear the men talking from her new position. "I pride myself that I will never sink so low as to be jealous of you." Lord Diederick said. "I am not in my position for the glory, but the power. I have no use for social niceties, but having an entire financial administration at my beck and call? That is what I live for."

"Mmm," Colonel Merrich said, drinking his Brandy. "You always were stiff-necked."

"I will remember your words the next time I approve your payroll."

Cinderella gawked at the pair for the moment. Lord Diederick was in an administrative position? Why in the blazes was he her finance contact at the palace?

The young man/dancing enthusiast gave one last look around the room before he left.

His exit was not a moment too soon, for Colonel Merrich and Lord Diederick started to turn their backs to the alcoholic drinks and face in Cinderella's direction.

Still carrying her drink, Cinderella cut in front of a couple and minced out of the room. Once in the ballroom, she downed her juice to moisten her dry mouth. "I can't believe I escaped that," she said before setting her empty goblet on a tray.

A nearby bell tower started to ring, and Cinderella listened to the tolls as she moved to join the reception line.

Cinderella winced when the tolls stopped. It was eleven. Thankfully the line to see Queen Freja was shortening—it started at the base of the stairs where the princes stood rather than winding around behind them—but depending how long it took, she may not have time to speak to the queen before midnight came.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Cinderella started estimating how long it would take her to reach the front of the line, counting on her fingers.

“Is something wrong, Mademoiselle?” asked a muffled voice.

The voice sounded familiar, so Cinderella automatically raised her eyes.

A young man dressed in black with a gray mask that covered his entire face addressed her. A crown was perched on his head. It was smaller and less ornate than the queen’s, and was made of copper or bronze and had only a large ruby surrounded by polished beads of onyx to decorate it.

The air left Cinderella’s lungs as she realized she was addressing one of the Erlauf princes, and she had no idea what either of them were named. “Prince...”

“Cristoph. The older one,” the prince said, his voice sounded amused rather than offended.

“Prince Cristoph,” Cinderella awkwardly repeated. “I thank you for the attention, but I am fine. I was merely taking note of the hour.”

“You were wondering if the wait was worth it to meet Mother?” the prince said. His mask had no opening for his mouth, and the eyeholes were covered with white netting, so Cinderella could see no part of his face. As such, it was hard for Cinderella to tell if he was being sarcastic or not because the mask muffled his voice and made him sound flat. Additionally, he seemed to be speaking oddly, as if he were pitching his voice extra low.

“I am sure Her Majesty Queen Freja is worth a wait of any length,” Cinderella firmly said. “But I am not certain I can stay long enough to speak to her.”

“Then speak with me, and when you return home, you can report to your family that you did speak to a member of royalty,” Prince Cristoph said.

Cinderella considered the offer.

He’s not the queen. But I suppose speaking to the Crown Prince is an excellent start.

“Very well, if you are not opposed to spending some of your time on me.”

“Not at all,” Prince Cristoph said before directing Cinderella out of the line.

The second prince—who wore clothes and a mask identical to Prince Cristoph’s—watched them leave, his face trained in their direction.

“Was there anything you wished to discuss with my mother?” Prince Cristoph asked.

“Yes, actually,” Cinderella said as she strolled with the prince.

People cleared the way for them, opening up a walking path wherever Cristoph went. Oddly enough, considering the way men had been kissing her hand and taking up her arm with no hesitation, the Prince did not lay so much as a finger on Cinderella, nor did he offer his arm as they walked.

“Did you wish to scold her over the rising taxes?” Prince Cristoph asked.

Cinderella frowned. “I would not be so rude and poor mannered to address that topic, Your Highness.”

“Then what did you plan to discuss with her?”

“Trieux.”

Prince Cristoph stopped walking for a brief moment. “I see. And what are your concerns?”

Cinderella took a deep breath and tried to calm her fluttering heart. “I feel the attitude of Erlauf and the remaining Trieux citizens must be addressed. The people are locked in a struggle against each other, and it is not good for a country—even one as strong as Erlauf—to have a portion of it divided.”

“You think Queen Freja should reestablish a Trieux government?”

“Stars above, no.” Cinderella said.

“Why not?”

Cinderella paused for a moment, composing her reply. Well, he hasn’t made fun of me yet, she thought.

“It has come to my attention that Erlauf is under attack, not by another country, but by sheer evil. Trieux cannot stand against an enemy of that caliber. Releasing Trieux will only bring waste to the land,” Cinderella said.

“That sounds melodramatic.”

“Of this I am aware, but it cannot be denied.”

“What proof do you have of this supposed evil?”



Cinderella grimly considered the question. She had great proof—her own experience, and Friedrich’s words. But she would like to avoid identifying herself. Taking a chance, Cinderella said, “It is no used to pretend otherwise, Your Highness. I have heard of the various attacks against the Erlauf Royal family.”

Prince Cristoph neither confirmed nor denied Cinderella’s accusation. “What do you propose?”

This was it!

“The separation between those of Erlauf and those of Trieux must be done away with. It is more an operation of attitude than action, but to succeed Queen Freja will need to make a conscious effort,” Cinderella said.

“You expect her to heal the divide with kindness?”

“Hate cannot drive out hate,” Cinderella said, echoing Friedrich. “As long as hate is shared, Trieux and Erlauf will be in an eternal struggle.”

Prince Cristoph was silent. “I would not argue that,” he finally said. “But it seems our lovely Queen will be footing the bill for this forgiveness you desire.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“Not so,” Cinderella said. “I know people of influence among Trieux. They will do their best to offer forgiveness on their side, as well,” Cinderella said.

She knew Julien was already on her side; Marie and her husband would be easy to sway—there was something to be said about being a merchant who was more interested in profits than bad blood among nobles. Perhaps the Girards could be convinced, and if they were, the Delattre’s would not be far behind. Also, Cinderella had a strange inkling that the half-deaf Lord Leroy might agree with her without any sort of persuasion at all.

“Would the lady care for a dance?” Prince Cristoph asked, shattering Cinderella’s thoughts. “We can still converse as we dance. Your conversation intrigues me.”

“Very well,” Cinderella said.

Prince Cristoph bowed before he approached the orchestra and spoke to them. They abruptly ended the slow song they played, and switched to a different tune.

“Have you ever danced an Erlauf circle?” Prince Cristoph asked.

“Yes,” Cinderella said, slow to commit. It was a dance that required absolutely no touching, although the dancers were still organized into couples. They moved around each other in a circular pattern, sliding close but never touching.

Cinderella’s Father once told her the dance was meant to mimic the movements of the Erlauf Calvary with the horses sliding forward and backward in matched patterns.

“So what does this forgiveness look like?” Prince Cristoph asked after he found a spot on the dance floor and lined up across from Cinderella.

“Like love,” Cinderella said.

Prince Cristoph almost missed the musical cue to step around Cinderella. “What does that mean?”

“It means Trieux nobles and shopkeepers hire people from Erlauf who immigrated to Werra. It means Erlauf soldiers are gentle with people from Trieux and do not treat them with suspicion,” Cinderella said as she and the prince side-stepped each other. “Erlauf citizens can share their knowledge of flower farming, and the Trieux vendors in the market could teach Erlauf folk how to barter.”

“This forgiveness of yours does not sound like the standard forgive and forget arrangement,” Prince Cristoph said as he bowed to Cinderella and she curtsied in tune with the music.

“Forgetting is not at all what forgiveness means. Forgiveness, in the case of our country, is forging ahead together. People from Trieux should intertwine with people from Erlauf. The Erlauf Royal Family should acknowledge they are in what once was Trieux. If they are seen eating a Trieux dish, or using a Trieux word to describe something, I can guarantee Trieux citizens will ponder what goods and crops they can sell that people from Erlauf would like,” Cinderella said, her shoulder almost brushing the prince’s.

“In other words, we should make an effort to adopt Trieux customs and culture into our lives?” Prince Cristoph asked.

“In a way, yes. Right now our countries are saturated with bitterness. If we try being a little less selfish, I think the bitterness can be purged,” Cinderella said, ducking

under Prince Cristoph's arm.

"I see. And you are willing to make some of the sacrifices you mentioned?" Prince Cristoph asked, stepping back with Cinderella before they came together again.

"Of course, or I wouldn't have the nerve to make these suggestions," Cinderella said.

"I fear there is too much bad blood between Trieux Nobles and Erlauf Nobles for friendship," Prince Cristoph said.

Cinderella twirled, her skirts swishing around her. "Perhaps. But there is something you must understand. The hearts of the Trieux commoners are ripe for the taking. For the most part, the upper class did a poor job caring for them. There were some exceptions, but I do not think any of the common class has strong feelings for Trieux nobility. If you can win over the entire commoner class, the remaining nobles and what few Trieux government officials are still alive will have no choice but to follow."

"I see," Prince Cristoph said, clapping twice, in synch with the male dancers.

"Additionally, you underestimate the next generation of Trieux nobles," Cinderella said, side-stepping Prince Cristoph again. "Several of the houses have young lords and ladies who are poised to take over their parents' titles. They do not have the same grudges and stubbornness of their parents. You might be able to win them over, if you strike soon," Cinderella said.

"Your thoughts intrigue me," Prince Cristoph said as the dance came to an end.

"But you do not support them?"

"I never said that. I am merely withholding judgment. It is warm in here; shall we

continue the conversation outside?”

“As you wish, your Highness,” Cinderella said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Prince Cristoph led Cinderella through the crowd—which opened up before him like magic—and out to a balcony.

It was of Trieux design, so naturally the balcony was beautiful. There was a white fountain placed perfectly so when silver moonlight struck the trickling water, the surface glowed. Sculpted, well-trimmed plants—the only sign of the Erlauf takeover, Cinderella suspected—made a stark contrast of green among the white balcony, fountain, and benches.

There were three soldiers on the balcony, but as soon as they saw Prince Cristoph, they leaped to their feet, bowed, and made a speedy exit.

“Your argument is well thought out,” Prince Cristoph said when they were alone.

Cinderella left him at the fountain and seated herself on a nearby bench, sighing in relief. The glass slippers were comfortable, but her feet ached from all the dancing. She hadn’t danced this must since her dance instructor declared her accomplished at age fourteen.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Cinderella said, smoothing her dress over the bench.

“But why such passion?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Prince Cristoph gestured widely. “Why subject yourself to such cares and worries? You are a beautiful woman. You could marry and wash your hands of the affair,

forgetting the matter. You do not have to save Erlauf.”

As tired as she was, the Prince’s words propelled Cinderella into standing. “First of all, I resent the idea that if a woman marries, her lot in life is to be empty-headed and pampered.”

“I did not say that,” Prince Cristoph said.

“You implied if I married, things like the country would no longer worry me. Why wouldn’t they? No one is bothering themselves to address this issue. Marriage would not change that, nor would it blind me to the truth that there is much work to be done, and everyone is too selfish to compromise or give up any comforts to see this situation changed,” Cinderella said, her voice hot and angry.

“Make no mistake, whether you and your great mother decide to help me or not, I will face this problem even if I must go at it alone,” Cinderella said, clenching her hands into fists.

Prince Cristoph pushed off from his perch on the fountain. “Your passion gives you much credit,” he said, stepping close to Cinderella. “And your dedication is admirable. I apologize for any offense my thoughtless words gave.”

Her temper cooling, Cinderella shook her head. “I am afraid, Your Highness. If we don’t make amends, will Erlauf survive?”

Prince Cristoph extended a hand towards Cinderella’s face. “We will—,” he cut himself off when Cinderella jerked away before he could graze her cheek with his fingers.

“I apologize again for my apparently offensive act,” Prince Cristoph said, his words slow and carefully pronounced.

“Oh, it isn’t—you misunderstood,” Cinderella said, clasping her hands in front of her. “It’s only...,” she trailed off, aware that she was starting to blush.

“You already have a man you care for?” Prince Cristoph guessed.

Startled, Cinderella fixed her eyes on his mask. It was to her shame, but he was right. Before she pulled away she hadn’t thought of her marriage prospects, as was her usual concern, but of the disappointed face Friedrich was sure to give her.

“How did you know?” she said, her eyes wide.

“Just a guess,” Prince Cristoph said, his voice cool. “A Trieux nobleman, I assume? Together you would have a better chance of molding the minds of Trieux commoners.”

“What? How would—what time is it?” Cinderella said, her heart freezing over when she realized she did not know the hour.

“I am not certain. So he is from Trieux?”

“Where can I find a clock?” Cinderella asked.

“What?”

“A clock! Where can I find a clock?”

“There is one above the ballroom entrance, but—,”

Cinderella was already scurrying into the hot ballroom. She covered her mouth to hold in a shriek when she saw the time—she had fifteen minutes before the magic would fade. In that time she needed to leave the palace, and get out of Werra!



Cinderella ran back to the threshold of the balcony and curtsied. “I thank you for your time, Prince Cristoph, you have been most gracious,” Cinderella before she turned on her heels and ran.

“Mademoiselle, wait! Mademoiselle,” Prince Cristoph shouted.

Cinderella ignored the calls and slipped her way out of the ballroom, apologizing to anyone she ran into in her hurry.

“My lady!”

Cinderella fled the ballroom and ran down the hallway. She was shocked when she heard the prince call to her. “Can’t you wait, Mademoiselle!”

She just reached the palace entrance when she heard the Prince order “Wait, stop her!”

Cinderella gave up running like a lady. She picked up her skirts and ran down the long line of stairs where her carriage waited.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

The walkway was lined with soldiers, who started to move towards her, but as soon as Cinderella gathered up her skirts they lunged backwards, as if she had hit them, and avoided looking at her.

At the bottom stairs Cinderella's mice-horses neighed to her and twitched their noses twice as fast as usual. The carriage driver baaed at her, and the goat-footgirl had the carriage door open. The orange interior of the carriage glowed in the night.

Cinderella was almost clear. She picked up her pace, but one of her glass slippers slipped and skid out from underneath her. Cinderella fell into a soldier, who steadied her by her waist before practically pushing her away from him.

In the bustle, Cinderella's foot slipped from a glass slipper, but Cinderella was too terrified to care.

"Go, go, go!" she shouted to her unusual attendants before stuffing herself into the carriage.

The goat-footgirl had just enough time to leap into place behind the carriage before the horses took off, jostling and bouncing the round carriage.

Cinderella stuck her head out of the window to see Prince Cristoph claiming her abandoned glass slipper and shouting at the soldiers.

One of the mice-horses let out a shrill neigh—which sounded suspiciously like a squeak, and Cinderella looked ahead to see patrolling squads convening in their pathway.

“Don’t stop,” Cinderella shouted to the goat-driver.

The horses bolted down a side street, the sudden turn knocking Cinderella back into the carriage. “We’re taking a different route! The mice won’t know how to get back, and won’t be able to slip out,” Cinderella winced.

Soldiers shouted; whistles were blown, and Cinderella’s carriage rolled on.

One soldier leaped onto the carriage and managed to cling to the door before the goat-footgirl kicked him in the face, dislodging him with great effectiveness.

The soldiers seemed unwilling to use weapons against Cinderella, her attendants, and her great round carriage, but they showed an unfortunate deftness in building barricades out of crates and barrels.

“No, not that way,” Cinderella cried when the mice-horses took another turn that faced them in the direction of the palace. She leaned out of the window to direct her brave steeds and driver. “Quick, take the side street on the left—the one that has the empty beer keg by it—yes!” Cinderella said before pulling herself back in the carriage, for it was a tight squeeze, and in several spots the carriage grazed the alley walls.

“As soon as the alley opens into a main road, take a left—perfect!” Cinderella said. “Now RUN!”

Soldiers on foot pursued them, but thankfully none were mounted. Yet.

Cinderella’s heart thundered in relief when she saw the city gates. “We’re almost there! We can lose them in the woods and fields!” Cinderella told her mice-horses and goat-attendants.

“Close the gates!” soldiers shouted, blowing their whistles.

“We have to get through!” Cinderella said.

The great wooden gates of Werra creaked and moaned as they were unhinged.

The bells in the city bell tower started ringing, their clear tolls sounding ominous to Cinderella’s panicked ears.

“We’re not going to make it,” she said, shutting her eyes as her carriage thundered along.

The mice-horses snorted, their hooves clattering on the stone streets. Whistles echoed from all over Werra, and the gates inched along as soldiers pushed against them.

The city bells tolled, and Cinderella’s mice-horses slid through the open gap between the doors. The round carriage got stuck—pinched between the doors—but the mice-horses threw themselves against their black harness, and the coach popped free.

“We did it! We did it! I can’t believe that we made it! Mice, I will feed you from my hand for the rest of your life!” Cinderella vowed as the doors swung shut behind them.

Even from behind the city walls, Cinderella could hear the soldiers working furiously to open the doors. A soldier standing watch on the wall blew his whistle and motioned in Cinderella’s direction.

“Quick, into the trees,” Cinderella said. They had come out on the wrong side of Werra and were reasonably far from Aveyron’s lands. But Cinderella was satisfied they were out at all—and the different location was a blessing, for the land surrounding the gate was heavily forested for hunting purposes.

The city bells still rang as Cinderella and her entourage disappeared into the trees. Cinderella threw herself out of the carriage just as it started shrinking, collapsing around her. The black harnesses dropped from the horses, who were temporarily shrouded in smoke with the driver and footgirl when the last bell tolled.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

When the smoke cleared, the elderly goat baaed at Cinderella. The four mice arranged themselves at Cinderella's feet, shivering, and the young goat stumbled and shook her head.

Cinderella's fancy dress was gone. She hadn't noticed when the white and gray fabric transformed back to her servants clothes, but she was grateful it had. She hurriedly took her apron off and ripped it in half. She ripped the ties off the bottom half and tied them around the leather collars the goats wore. She took the top half of the apron and tied it to her head, covering her hair. She placed the glass slipper—the only reminder of the entire mad evening—on the remaining square of apron fabric. She tied the fabric around it like it was a sack of food that she carried.

“Hide for a moment,” Cinderella said to the mice.

They scurried off into the underbrush, doing as they were told.

When the soldiers entered the woods moments later, they found only a servant girl toting two goats instead of the fleeing coach with the agile carriage horses they were looking for.

“Spread out and see if the dogs can pick up the trail,” a lieutenant riding a black horse shouted, holding a torch above his head.

“Yes, sir!”

The lieutenant dismounted and approached the girl and her goats—who were baaing and shying at the soldiers and their dogs.

“Good evening, miss,” the lieutenant said, dipping the brim of his hat at the girl. “I apologize for the interruption, but did you happen to see a round, gold carriage come through these woods?”

“A round carriage?” the girl said, yelping when her buck goat tried to headbutt a dog that was sniffing an unripe pumpkin nearby. “That would certainly be an odd sight. Nope, I haven’t seen anything like that ‘round here,” she said, her eyes wide.

“Are you certain?” the lieutenant asked.

“I think t’would be rather hard to miss, if you excuse me for saying so,” the goat girl said, a little breathless as her goats yanked her around.

“Very well, thank you for your time,” the lieutenant said before he returned to his horse and blew a whistle and addressed his soldiers. “Red Dogs, follow the road with the dogs and search for tracks. Gray Boys, search the woods on both sides. Don’t depend on the dogs. Look for tracks, and keep an eye out for any side trails they may have taken. She can’t have gotten too far, or our scouts on the walls would have seen her leave the trees,” he said.

As the soldiers organized themselves, they ignored the wide-eyed servant girl and her white goats. They didn’t even notice when the girl stopped to let four mice crawl into her sack before she started off, her shoulders stiff and her chin held high.

## Chapter 16

“There you are, Cinderella. You have chosen an unlikely spot to sleep in.”

Cinderella groaned and rolled over, crashing off the settee she had collapsed in the night before.

“Ow,” she said. The aches and pains of her body brought the previous night’s events to her mind. Her feet hurt from the dancing and walking without shoes. Her arms hurt from the goats yanking on her the whole way home. As they had popped out on the wrong side of Werra, it had taken over an hour to reach Aveyron. It was all Cinderella could do to put the goats away, free the mice, and collapse in the nearest settee.

“Your servants are desperately looking for you. Some officials have arrived—they are asking for you.”

Cinderella finally recognized Lady Klara’s voice. “Great,” she said into the ground.

“I will inform Jeanne of your location, but, Cinderella?”

“Hm.”

“You looked lovely last night,” Lady Klara said before she was gone with the swish of skirts.

That comment got Cinderella scrambling off the floor. “You saw?” she squeaked. If Lady Klara realized it was her, did anyone else?”

Lady Klara was already gone, though, and Jeanne barged through the door seconds later.

“Mademoiselle,” she said, the closest thing she ever came to chiding Cinderella as she took in Cinderella’s wrinkled, askew clothes. “You must change into something more suitable, now,” she said, hovering around Cinderella in an effort to herd her to her rooms.

“Why?” Cinderella asked, rubbing her eyes.



“Prince Cristoph has called upon Aveyron, and asks to see you!”

Cinderella froze. “I beg your pardon, who is here?”

“Prince Cristoph! You must get changed—Mademoiselle?”

Cinderella sprinted out of the room, manners and elegance forgotten.

“He’s going to arrest me; he’s going to have me thrown in jail; he’s going to do something!” Cinderella said, darting down the chateau hallways.

“Mademoiselle,” various servants called as she charged past them.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Cinderella ignored the calls and made a beeline for the kitchens. “If no one can find me, he’ll go away. He’ll have to go away, and I have to find Friedrich and talk to him—curse my impulsive self!” Cinderella said. She nearly collided with a maid who bore a tray of food, but dodged at the last moment.

She slid into the kitchens, ignoring the uproar her servants were in, dodged a live chicken, and tripped on the cat sunning herself on the stoop outside the entrance to the kitchens.

Cinderella tilted alarmingly and almost fell, but she righted herself at the last moment and hopped several steps. “Darned cat!”

“I have to say, I’ve never seen you fall before, but you’ve gotten precariously close in the past day or so.”

Cinderella stopped pinwheeling her arms and could not help the rush of relief she felt when she saw Friedrich standing not three paces away, his arms folded across his chest.

“Friedrich!” Cinderella cried, throwing herself at him. “I am so glad to see you—but we have to get out of here. The Prince—,” Cinderella cut herself short and stepped back when her eyes finally caught up with her mind, and she realized Friedrich was not wearing his usual uniform.

Friedrich wore an outfit of black, and on his head was the copper crown with the ruby setting Prince Cristoph wore.

“I’m going to sit down,” Cinderella announced before her legs gave out, and she sat down, hard, on the ground.

“I thought you would try to run when my men flashed my full title, so I positioned myself in the location you were most likely to exit from.”

“You’re a prince!?”

“Yes.”

“The oldest prince?”

“Prince Cristoph VI, yes.”

“Then you lied? You’ve been lying to me?” Cinderella said, her chest heaving.

“Not entirely. I go by Friedrich (as Cristoph is a family name), and it can make discussions quite confusing. I don’t use my prince title often, as my main occupation is Colonel of the First Regiment.”

Cinderella pushed herself to her feet, anger giving her newfound strength. “The organizing it must have taken to pull this over me—your whole regiment was in on it, weren’t they? And that explains why you kept sticking up for your greedy Queen Freja!”

“What happened to forgiveness?”

“That was BEFORE I found out you’ve been lying to me this entire time!”

“Cinderella, you need to calm down,” Friedrich said.

“I HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE CALM IN MY LIFE!” Cinderella roared.

“I see,” Friedrich said.

“What was this past summer to you?” Cinderella said, stalking back and forth like an angry mountain cat. “A joke? A way to amuse yourself—by watching the penniless duchess scrabble for change?”

“It was a marriage interview.”

“What?”

Friedrich grabbed Cinderella by her shoulders. “Listen to me for a minute.”

Cinderella briefly considered slapping him, but settled for angrily brushing his hands off her shoulders.

“Mother and Father will be leaving the Trieux territory soon. For safety and military reasons, they must return to our fortifications in Erlauf—there have been magical attacks, as you know. I am to remain behind and rule in their stead. Since the war, I knew I would have to marry someone of Trieux blood to stabilize our claim to Trieux. So, I’ve been watching all eligible girls from the noble class, the guild and merchant glass, and the daughters of the remaining Trieux officials. I narrowed down my selection to include you, which was when I decided I wanted to meet you.”

“So, I was the best-bred mare to suit your purposes?” Cinderella said, her eyes narrowed. “You’re not winning any points for charm, Your Highness.”

Friedrich ignored the acid in her voice. “I know the story is less than romantic...but it’s all I have. I am the prince of a country that has finished one war and is on the brink of another against an enemy we have no real means of conquering. I’m sorry I

only looked at you because I had to marry someone from Trieux. I wish I had approached you with more wholesome intents, but it is unfair to discount my love for you because of that.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why did you want to meet me?”

Friedrich hesitated. “Because of...the position I’m in, I knew I needed to be careful with who I selected as my wife. I wanted someone who could learn to love Erlauf as I love it.”

“And?”

“I heard about your unusual situation—the way you gave up everything to keep your servants. Your actions were selfless, and they were what made me decide I should meet you. The day you saved my life, I knew, if I could convince you, you would love Erlauf just as fiercely as you love your servants,” Friedrich said, fixing his dark eye on Cinderella.

Cinderella could feel her anger starting to subside, but she wouldn’t admit it, so she looked away and turned her back to Friedrich.

“And then I fell deeply in love with you, and I worried you would marry me only to save Aveyron. You never gave any indication you felt more for me than friendship. You still haven’t,” Friedrich said, standing behind Cinderella.

He was so close Cinderella could feel the heat of his body, but he did not touch her.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“Cinderella, who were you thinking of when you refused my touch last night?” Friedrich said, his voice flat.

Cinderella set her shoulders and did not respond.

“Cinderella, please.”

Cinderella turned around. “Who do you think it was, but you, you idiot!” she said, smacking Friedrich to cover her embarrassed blush.

Friedrich caught Cinderella’s hand and pulled her into a hug, encasing his arms around her. As Cinderella leaned into him, she suspected he hadn’t touched her the night before because there was no way she would fail to recognize his warmth.

“Why didn’t you tell me who you were?” Cinderella whispered.

Friedrich snorted. “Cinderella, you are loyal and lovely as the dawn, but you do not hesitate to use yourself as a bargaining chip. You cannot deny it. You would have accepted my offer purely because it would put you in a higher position of power to care for and protect Trieux citizens.”

Cinderella thought for a moment. “That’s about right,” she admitted. “But you said that’s what you were looking for in a wife.”

Friedrich kissed the top of Cinderella’s head. “Yes, before I fell in love with you,” he said, sounding quite sheepish. “After that I grew quite stubborn about wanting to woo you rather than buying your affections.”

“And all the sweet talking of your mother?”

“I want you two to get along. You need to get along,” Friedrich said.

“Why?”

“...You’re going to marry me, right?”

“You haven’t asked.”

“I’ll get to that in a minute. I have it all planned, and it will knock your shoes off—again. So yes, you and mother must get along, and I really wanted you to express concern for Erlauf as a whole and see the need for forgiveness because...”

“Because?”

“Well,” Friedrich looked to the sky when Cinderella leaned back far enough that she could see him. “Because I’m aiming to be the Commander of the Erlauf Army, like my Father.”

“And?”

“And so, as my wife, you will be the ruling queen,” Friedrich said.

Cinderella blinked. “So I will be queen and you’ll be king.”

“No, you will be queen and I will be your consort. I will control the Army, but you will have undisputed control over the country.”

“But how can you...what?”

“The Erlauf Army needs direct supervision thanks to its size and power. I can’t be the Commander and lead the country. If Johann, my brother, showed any inclination to be the Commander, then I could just be King. But he spends most of his time making eyes at foreign dignitaries and refuses to enter the Army,” Friedrich said, sounding disgusted. “Besides, I take after my father with my sweet, quiet, personality. I am so easily frightened and cowed. Mother always told me I was born to be a consort.”

“You are without a doubt your Mother’s son,” Cinderella dryly said as she tried to adjust her mind to the idea. “Queen? And you would only be the consort? Are you sure?”

“Now you see why I wanted to be sure you loved me before I told you? Although you still haven’t said you do...”

“And you still haven’t asked me to marry you.”

“Right, let’s take care of that. This way, please,” Friedrich said, taking Cinderella’s hand and leading her to the front of the Chateau.

Friedrich’s soldiers from his regiment saw them and started hooting and whistling.

“I haven’t convinced her yet! Stop carrying on, or she’ll run the other way,” Friedrich said as they stopped at a covered wagon. He plucked a sack from the driver’s seat and led Cinderella on.

“What’s in the wagon?” Cinderella asked.

“You can just sense money, can’t you? It’s gold.”

“What for?”



“It’s the exact amount Aveyron owed Mother before you paid off the debt. It is my bribe in case you decide to say no. Sit here, on that bench. Yes, face this way, perfect,” Friedrich said, arranging Cinderella on the bench next to the hulking wild rose bush.

“Put both feet on the ground, this shoe off, please, thank you,” Friedrich said, twitching one of Cinderella’s shoes off her feet. “Stay. There,” Friedrich said, pointing to the bench before he retreated some distance.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Still within view, Friedrich attempted to smooth his clothes, which were as badly wrinkled as Cinderella's. He tossed his crown aside, and plucked a basket out of the sack. He took a deep breath, held the basket behind his back and turned to face Cinderella.

“Duchess Cinderella Lacreux, I must confess I have fallen deeply in love with you. If you would marry me, I would be the happiest of men—but there are some things that must be stated. I am in the Army, and while you will always have my love, I cannot guarantee I will always return to you whole, or alive,” Friedrich said, briefly shutting his eye. “Also, I am the prince of a troubled country. If you marry me, I fear you will be called to show love, kindness, and compassion beyond what a normal human could extend. I am confident my country will learn to love you and cherish you as deeply as I do, but I am aware you have already made great sacrifices... and I do not want to force more on you,” Friedrich said, kneeling at Cinderella's feet.

“I want to marry you not because you have the strength of will to save my desperate country, but because you have stolen my heart for some months now, and I want to spend every second I can in your presence. If you choose to marry me, I will treasure your love and loyalty more than the Crown jewels, and I will do my best to make you happy and to make you smile and laugh for the rest of your life. I am from Erlauf, not Trieux, and most of my worth is based on my military position rather than my royal title. It's not what you deserve, but I ask that you would consider it, consider me. Cinderella, will you marry me?”

Friedrich's eye shone with love, and perhaps a little fear. He was a man nearly impossible to read. The display of trust twisted Cinderella's heart.

Cinderella smiled through the tears in her eyes. “Cristoph Friedrich, before I answer, there are some things that must be stated,” she said, smiling. “Yesterday I officially refused Julien’s suit because I realized I was in love with another man—you—and I didn’t want to marry anyone else. Also, your country ceased to bother me months ago as you have taught me to look past heritage and study a person’s heart. As for your profession, I would be proud to call a soldier—a calling of bravery and courage that I am ashamed to say I previously did not value—my husband. Finally, I will gladly make personal sacrifices if it means I can marry you.”

“So, your answer...?” Friedrich asked.

“Yes!” Cinderella laughed before throwing her arms around him.

Friedrich released the deep breath he’d been holding. “I am so glad,” he said. “I didn’t even have to use my bribe.”

Cinderella laughed.

“Mother and Johann cannot wait to meet you. I think you will get on with mother—I hope you hate Johann. He’s a brat,” Friedrich savagely said, running his fingers through Cinderella’s hair.

“And your Father?”

“You already met him. You must have impressed him considerably. He said if I bungled this, he was going to demote me.”

“When did I meet your Father?” Cinderella frowned, pulling back from the hug.

“During the ball. He was the third man to dance with you. The middle-aged military chap,” Friedrich said.

Cinderella's eyes widened.

"How rude of me. I almost forgot," Friedrich said before presenting Cinderella with the basket.

Inside the basket sat a glass slipper, and nestled in the shoe's toe, a sparkling ring. "I made the basket myself," Friedrich added, removing the ring from the shoe before sliding it over Cinderella's finger.

On closer inspection, Cinderella gulped. The ring was a large ruby with the Erlauf insignia etched into the surface. It seemed very likely that it was a Crown Jewel.

When Cinderella looked up, Friedrich wore the same smug, smarmy smile he occasionally wore when he first started visiting her stand.

"You have been planning this for a long time, haven't you?" she asked.

"You have no idea," Friedrich said with his roguish grin. "About half of the concerns your market friends had for you were quite valid."

"Come now, you are more honorable than they said you were."

"Only just so," Friedrich said, sliding his hand down Cinderella's ankle before he slipped the glass slipper on her foot. "But it doesn't matter. I have found my queen. Although... it does raise an important question."

"Yes?"

"We have both admitted we love each other."

"Yes?"

“And we’re engaged.”

“Yes?”

“May I finally kiss you?” Friedrich said in a tone of long suffering.

Cinderella laughed so hard Friedrich finally stood up rather than remain crouching on the ground.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then why are you still laughing?”

“No, yes!”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Friedrich blinked before he grasped what she meant. With a swoop he picked up Cinderella and set her on her feet. He slid one hand up her jawline and the other around her waist, pulling her close before he leaned over and kissed her.

Kissing Friedrich was like getting caught in a summer storm. It was beautiful and perhaps a little terrifying and overwhelming. She didn't think she could have felt more shocked and alive if the skies opened up and dumped buckets of torrential rains on her. Cinderella felt treasured in Friedrich's arms, pulled so tight against his chest she could feel the beat of his heart. The hair on the back of her neck prickled—as it did whenever a lightning strike was within a mile from Aveyron—and, oddly enough, she felt peace.

“Definitely worth the wait,” Cinderella pronounced, a little breathlessly, when they were finished.

“Yes,” Friedrich said, sliding an arm across Cinderella's back. “Steel yourself; the audience will demand to know how it went.”

“How on earth did you get your soldiers to help so much with this whole thing, anyway?”

“Truthfully it was more difficult persuading them to leave you alone. My men know who I am. Naturally they were curious about you. You won them over without any help on my end—which is a good thing. It would not bode well if the Army didn't accept you.”

“How can they accept me if they do not even know me? I have only met soldiers

from your regiment.”

“Word travels fast in the Army, and no one keeps any news to themselves,” Friedrich said as he guided Cinderella out of the gardens and straight into a scene from a tavern.

The soldiers had uncovered the cargo of a second wagon—which was composed entirely of beer and mead.

“Kurt! You’re on duty!” Friedrich shouted over the happy cheers when the soldiers caught sight of Friedrich and Cinderella.

“That’s the thing, sir,” Gustav, who was standing with Kurt and a freshly poured pint. “None of us are. We’re all here off duty—we wanted to see how this would turn out.”

Friedrich blinked. “Kurt! You said General Harbach sent you—,”

“We lied,” Kurt said.

“Cheers,” Tobias, the soldier who shot the dark mage, said as he raised a tankard in the air.

Friedrich groaned. “This is some way to convince you of my administrative capabilities,” he said.

“Friedrich?”

“What?”

Cinderella giggled and leaned in. “I love you,” she said before kissing him soundly.

The soldiers roared even louder, hooting at their commanding officer and his lady love.

“What is this?” Cinderella asked, staring at the beautiful, elaborate dress hanging in her armoire. Cinderella felt a moment of panic. “Jeanne, I didn’t order any dresses to be made!” She might be engaged to a prince of Erlauf, but that did nothing to change her monetary state until they were married. She couldn’t afford such a lavish clothing item.

“It is from Colonel Friedrich, Mademoiselle,” Jeanne said, securing the drapes in Cinderella’s bedroom.

Cinderella frowned and caressed the fabric, grimacing when the tough skin of her fingers scraped the soft fabric. “What for?”

“I would assume it is for your presentation to Queen Freja this evening,” Jeanne said.

“...What?”

“The presentation?”

“No, not that. It’s...nothing,” Cinderella said, looking at the dress.

“He sent a matching jewelry set as well,” Jeanne said, indicating to a velvet box that rested on Cinderella’s bed.

Cinderella looked from the box to the dress. She caught sight of herself in the cracked mirror positioned across the room—one of the few mirrors retained in Aveyron because the fissure reduced its worth to copper pennies.

Cinderella’s reflection stared back at her. She wore Friedrich’s dragon necklace



openly, sitting on the drab cloth of her servant clothes.

“Do you think he is ashamed of me?” Cinderella asked.

“It is not my place to say, Mademoiselle.”

“Jeanne, please.”

Jeanne pursed her lips. “I would find it hard to believe so, Mademoiselle. Particularly when one considers how he carries on.”

Cinderella nodded. “Thank you. Perhaps he means to protect me from his mother.”

Jeanne’s silence was heavy with dislike, and Cinderella cocked her head as she studied the dress.

“No,” Cinderella said, closing the door to her armoire.

“No, Mademoiselle?”

“No, I will not wear the dress. Queen Freja had best know who she’s letting into the family. I don’t care if I’m as out of place as a black sheep. I go in this,” Cinderella savagely said, jabbing a finger at her fractured reflection.

“As you wish, Mademoiselle,” Jeanne said. Her words were placid, but Cinderella thought she detected just a hint of pride in them.

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Cinderella arrived at the palace, late, in a carriage Friedrich sent to pick her up. The footman nor the driver gave her choice of clothing so much a second glance, but the closer they drew to the Palace, the more aware Cinderella was of the declaration her plain clothes made.

She was about to meet Queen Freja, Friedrich's mother and the ruler of the country. I don't want to antagonize her...but I will not be made into a pretty Trieux doll that stands at Friedrich's side. She was wrong to tax Aveyron, to tax Trieux so much. I will not pretend otherwise, Cinderella thought before she popped out of the carriage.

A butler escorted Cinderella through the palace. Cinderella's heart pounded in her throat when the butler stopped in front of a set of doors and threw them open.

"Duchess Lacreux," he announced, stepping aside and bowing.

The room—a parlor—was filled with low-pitched murmurings. The whispers fell silent when Cinderella stepped forward, entering the light of the fire.

Queen Freja stood, her face cold and unmoving as granite. Prince Johann was with her, covering his mouth with his jacket sleeve to hide his grin and muffle his laugh. The consort—Commander Lehn—froze in the middle of standing up.

Only Friedrich reacted as if nothing was wrong. "Cinderella, I'm glad you are finally here. I was almost ready to dispatch a squad to track you down," he said, strolling up to her side.

"I was detained," Cinderella said.

“What, was a cow about to calf?” Prince Johann asked.

“Johann,” Queen Freja said, her voice sharp.

Cinderella gave the younger prince her most brilliant smile. “I would be the last person my servants would call upon for such a situation, for I am rather ignorant in that area,” she said, taking Friedrich’s arm. “It seems, though, you have some knowledge of the act?”

“Lady Lacreux, how good it is to see you again,” Commander Lehn said before his son could reply, bowing when Cinderella and Friedrich approached the rest of the family.

Cinderella swallowed as she met Queen Freja’s dark eyes, preparing herself for the verbal war that was likely to commence. This was it. This was her first meeting with the loathed Queen Freja, the woman Cinderella itched to shake and yell at for years. And she was marrying this woman’s son.

“Cinderella, I apologize.”

Cinderella blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I have wronged you,” Queen Freja said. “I singled out Trieux nobles—in particular I singled out you, to tax in order to make up for the country’s deficit. It was ignoble and unforgiveable as a monarch acquainting herself with her new subjects.”

Cinderella opened and closed her mouth, baffled beyond words.

“I have pushed you and your compatriots to the brink out of sheer spite. It pains me to admit it, but I have done a poor job of ruling Trieux. I ask that you would forgive us, forgive me,” Queen Freja said, bowing her head.

All of Cinderella's anger, hatred, and stored words to shout were gone. As the ultimate ruler of a country, it would be difficult to tell a seventeen-year-old Trieux girl she behaved wrongly.

When Cinderella's father accepted the rules and regulations Erlauf threw at them after the war, Cinderella thought he was afraid for their lives. But now, Cinderella understood why he reacted without hate. No matter what he left behind, Cinderella had no doubts of her Father's heart, because of the words he spoke.

"My Father, a kind and noble man, once told me nobody wins in a war," Cinderella said, finding her voice. "I think I finally, fully understand what he meant. Both Trieux and Erlauf have committed transgressions. I accept your apology, and I offer my forgiveness, if you will look past the pain my country has caused you, My Queen."

Queen Freja smiled with her eyes. "I am glad Friedrich chose you," she said, her voice low and melodic.

Friedrich and Cinderella shared a look. "I knew you would be," he said, his voice smug as he slid an arm around Cinderella and squeezed her.

The royal family laughed.

"...you mentioned a deficit?" Cinderella asked to cover up some of her embarrassment.

"To finance the war, we took a loan from Arcainia—a large obligation we have scrambled to fulfill. All of your tax money went straight to Arcainia to pay back what we owe," Friedrich said. "I'm sorry, Pet, but the kingdom you are about to become Princess over is in debt."

Cinderella offered the royal family a weak smile. "If I know anything," she said, "It is

debt and deficits.”

“Cinderella, Friedrich has hogged you for entirely too long. Please, tell me about yourself. What are your likes and dislikes?” Commander Lehn said, his kind smile putting Cinderella at ease. “Besides food,” he teased.

Cinderella laughed. “Food is certainly something I deeply enjoy. I liked horseback riding, although I cannot boast of much skill in that area. Trade interests me, as do current events,” Cinderella said.

Johann raised an eyebrow. “So you are a budding scholar?” he asked. “Ouch,” he said when Friedrich kicked him in the back of the knee.

“Unfortunately not. I have an abundance of ignorance,” Cinderella sighed.

“What do you mean?” Commander Lehn asked.

“When I was a girl, I was schooled in womanly subjects,” Cinderella grouched. “Arts, literature, history, dancing, and the like. I wish I had a better grasp on things like politics, economics, trade, and farming.”

“If you are truly interested in furthering your knowledge, I can arrange for a tutor,” Queen Freja said. “What?” she said when Friedrich and Johann stared at her. “She is to be my successor; the more knowledgeable she is, the better. Lord Diederick already offered to school her in financing and budgeting.”

Friedrich looked down at Cinderella and said, “Don’t we have any female tutors?”

Cinderella rolled her eyes. “Fred.”

“Friedrich told me of a conversation you had with him in which you said Trieux government was more open with information. Would you care to come for tea tomorrow and discuss the concept?” Queen Freja asked.

“I would be honored and delighted, My Queen.”

“Please, call me Freja. In several months, you will be my daughter.”

“Thank you, Freja,” Cinderella said before she caught a glance of Friedrich’s expression. “What?”

Friedrich frowned. “I hoped you two would get along, but I cannot say I wanted you

to bond this well.”

Cinderella blinked. “Why not?”

“Do not listen to him, Cinderella; he is only jealous. Now that he has successfully won you over, he must actually return to his duties and stop kicking up his heels and using his men like a circus master. General Harbach looks forward to his full-time return,” Commander Lehn said, chuckling at the thought.

“I knew it. I knew you were skipping out on work. No officer has that much time on their hands,” Cinderella said.

Friedrich shifted his gaze to his parents. “When are you leaving Werra again?”

“Friedrich, don’t be silly. You are going to get married soon; we cannot leave now,” Queen Freja said.

Friedrich looked to his brother. “At least you’re leaving, right?”

“I would love to, but mother has me chained to her,” Johann dryly said.

“Blast,” Friedrich muttered.

“Think of it this way, son. We will help ease your lovely bride into her new role,” Commander Lehn said.

“Speaking of which, I would like to address this debt you mentioned. How much is it?” Cinderella asked.

“Lord Diederick has the current estimate. After dinner, we can pay a social call to his offices,” Queen Freja said.

“Wait a moment, about those female tutors,” Friedrich said, jumping into the conversation.

As Cinderella sat down with Queen Freja and Friedrich, she thought of how nice it would be to have a family again. She would be stupid to think she wouldn’t have disagreements with Queen Freja, Friedrich, or the rest of the royal Erlauf family in the future. But Cinderella was confident they would work through the arguments. After all, nobody wins in a war, but everyone triumphs in the face of love and forgiveness.

Epilogue “...‘proposed road improvements will reduce the current transportation time and provide safer, less hazardous trade routes’— Margrit, deny this petition. Please make a note on it that Erlauf doesn’t have much of a trade route because they lack goods, not because of poor road conditions. Before I stoop to spend money on the roads, they must first come up with an export or crop other countries actually want. And no, flowers do not count,” Cinderella said, pacing up and down the palace hall. She paused long enough to pass the petition off to one of her secretaries—who also happened to be Julien Rosseux’s fiancée.

“Flowers do not count....Done,” Margrit said, her quill flashing as she scrawled on the paper.

“Thank you. May I have the next petition?” Cinderella asked, fussing with the train of her white dress.

“You have reviewed all the petitions we brought with us today.”

“Really? Hm. Did you happen to bring Fostering Economic Wealth through Animal Husbandry?” Cinderella asked.

“I did,” Margrit said, digging a large book out of a satchel that hung from her



shoulder.

“You are incredible, Margrit.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. I am happy to be of service,” Margrit said, her voice warm with affection.

“Ahem.”

Cinderella and Margrit guiltily looked to the flock of lady’s maids who trailed behind them.

The head lady’s maid—a formidable woman dressed with clothes starched so heavily, they would have stood upright without her body to support them—shook her head.

“Oh, but I just—,” Cinderella started.

The head lady’s maid shook her head again. “You will ruin your dress, Your Grace.”

Cinderella impatiently pushed a scarlet curl out of her face. “It is only a book. It’s not an animal,” she said moving her skirts to cover the velvet brown mouse that wore a tiny belled collar and climbed on her glass slipper with great familiarity.

“No,” the head lady’s maid said.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

“I could read it to you, if you like, Your Grace,” Margrit suggested.

Cinderella stooped in relief. “Would you?”

“Certainly, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Margrit. I don’t know what I would do without you,” Cinderella said, waiting for the mouse to move before she resumed walking.

“Do you know what page you were on?”

“I believe I just started chapter six...,” she trailed off, staring at a tapestry that hung on the wall of the grand palace.

“Is something wrong, Your Grace?” Margrit asked.

Cinderella stared at the tapestry. It showed a garden scene of several pretty maidens seated among rose bushes with a white unicorn. Cinderella could have drawn it by memory because she had seen it every day of her childhood, until she sold it with the first batch of Aveyron household goods when she became duchess. “This is mine,” she said.

Margrit blinked. “If you will pardon me for saying so, Your Grace, in a few minutes everything here will belong to you,” she delicately said.

“No, you don’t understand. This is mine. It was—where did it come from?”

Margrit looked helplessly to the lady's maids.

"I believe most of the items in this part of the palace were purchased from Trieux nobility, Your Grace. Queen Freja was quite displeased with Prince Cristoph for his extreme patronage of Von Beiler—a broker," Lady Therese said. Before Queen Freja recruited her as one of Cinderella's lady's maids, the woman served as a head accounting officer. (Queen Freja cleverly used the post of lady's maids to place intelligent, knowledgeable women near Cinderella to act as advisors. Cinderella was very thankful as most of her schooling and training was in history, appreciation of the arts, dancing, and farming.) "Von Beiler, you say?" Cinderella asked, her voice light and airy.

"Yes," Lady Therese said.

Margrit and the lady's maids shifted with unease as Cinderella folded her hands in front of her.

"I will be back in a moment," she announced before picking up the skirts of her dress and heading down the hallway."

"Your Grace, your wedding starts in a few minutes!" Margrit said, hurrying after her.

"It can wait," Cinderella said, her glass slippers clicking when she stepped off the rugs and walked on the smooth, polished, stone floor.

"Your Grace, what of your dress and veil!" the lady's maids squawked.

"The Lady Enchantress Angelique spelled them for me. I do not think a short walk will ruin them," Cinderella said, her veil floating behind her like a cloud.

In a few minutes, Cinderella stood outside Friedrich's room. She had never been

inside before—mostly because she had no reason to. Friedrich rarely used his rooms in the royal palace, and after they were married, they would have joint quarters.

Now, however, Cinderella had a sneaking suspicion.

“Your GRACE,” a lady’s maid shrieked when Cinderella pushed the doors open.

“Yes, it is as I thought,” Cinderella said, entering the room, although she barely had enough space to walk in.

“Your Grace, this might be a little unseemly,” Margrit said.

Cinderella pointed to a beautiful writing desk. “That was mine,” she announced. “And I would recognize this rug anywhere. That horse statue used to stand in my parlor—it’s a sculpture of a riding horse I used to have. The tapestry, bookshelf, wall hangings, everything is...,” she trailed off when she got to a painting covered with a white sheet.

“Your Grace,” another lady’s maid said when Cinderella yanked the sheet from the painting, which was also from Aveyron. It was the image Cinderella had been shocked to receive an offer for: the portrait of Cinderella in her Trieux finery.

Cinderella painfully smiled. The last time she saw the portrait, she had shorn hair, dressed in servants clothes, and was selling every last good she had. Now her hair was nearly shoulder length, curled, dressed with pearls and tiny roses, and covered with a snow-white veil. Her dress was made of the finest silk and lace, accented and highlighted with lace that matched the blue-grey of Cinderella’s stormy eyes.

The color scheme was the same one Angelique used for Cinderella’s ball gown months ago, but this dress had a longer train, was more intricate, and was gathered and pinned into place with real jewels.

“So many changes,” Cinderella murmured, reaching out to brush the gold frame, ignoring the squawks of her lady’s maids in the hallway.

“Um, Your Grace,” Margrit said.

“Hm?” Cinderella asked, turning to look at more of her possessions scattered through the room. “What is it Margrit?” she asked when there was silence.

“She only wanted to warn you of me.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

Cinderella turned around to face Friedrich. He wore a band of red cloth tied over both his eyepatch and his eye, but he was still handsome and alarmingly roguish in his military uniform with his crown fixed on his head instead of his usual hat. “Your lady’s maids tell me you have lost all sense of propriety, and I am to fix you without setting eye on you,” he teased.

“You’ve been helping for a long time. Even before you decided to marry me,” Cinderella said.

“I didn’t buy everything, just the items Von Beiler said you seemed to place special value on,” Friedrich said, his voice soft but serious.

“It was only because I sold these items that Aveyron survived the first few months after my father’s death,” Cinderella said, looking at the familiar furniture pieces and decorations. “Why did you help me?”

“When Mother hit you with the inheritance tax, you could have easily dismissed servants. Instead, you sold things. Von Beiler told me you sold your favorite horse and sobbed while it was led away. Someone who cares that much for the people they are responsible for deserves help.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Friedrich shrugged. “I wanted to surprise you with all your furniture in our new rooms.”

Cinderella stood at Friedrich’s side and leaned into him. “I am so grateful for you,

Friedrich. And I'm sorry I ever thought wrong of you."

Friedrich blindly patted Cinderella before he was able to curl an arm around her waist. "You didn't know any better, Pet. I only wish I could have done more—though I suppose if I had you would be dealing with even more monetary issues now."

"It is not as bad as you think. Once I finish selling off the tacky Trieux goods, we should be in a fine position. It was sheer luck Princess Elise of Arcainia agreed to take that ghastly throne in the ballroom as part of our payments."

"She has been exceedingly generous since her brothers are no longer birds," Friedrich agreed, getting a giggle out of Cinderella.

They were silent for a few moments, enjoying the quiet and each other's presence.

Cinderella sighed. "I suppose we should make our way to the ceremony?"

"That would probably be for the best," Friedrich agreed. "I'll go first. I will see you there?"

"Of course."

"Good, just double checking. Until then," Friedrich said, fumbling for Cinderella's bare hand before he kissed it. "She is all yours, ladies," Friedrich said, joining the lady's maids in the hallway before pulling off the blindfold.

"Your Grace," the head lady's maid said, planting her fists on her hips. "It is good you are concerned for the welfare of this nation, and it is very admirable that you push yourself to learn for our sake. But you must stop for the rest of today."

Cinderella sighed in defeat. "As you wish. Margrit, there's no reason for you to waste

your time with me. I believe Julien is saving a seat for you, yes? You may as well join him,” Cinderella said.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Margrit curtsied.

“Be sure to sit on my side of the cathedral!” Cinderella called after her secretary.

“Why does the side matter, Your Grace?” a lady’s maid asked, bribing Cinderella from Friedrich’s rooms with the question.

“Does Erlauf not follow the tradition where one side is meant to be the bride’s family and friends, and the other side the groom’s?” Cinderella asked.

“No, that is an Erlauf tradition as well.”

“Ah, well, that is why. I fear my side will be dreadfully empty, as most of my family is gone, and the majority of those whom I invited are not the type to attend—besides the other Trieux nobles of course,” Cinderella gloomily said.

She had invited all of her servants from Aveyron, but none of them would commit to coming. They were probably counting down the days until their untraditional mistress would be out of their hair.

The lady’s maids exchanged glances, but none of them said a word as they hustled Cinderella down the hallway.

When they finally reached the cathedral door—the Trieux royals were apparently so lazy that when designing the palace, they smacked a cathedral in the thick of it so they wouldn’t have to leave their comfort for church—Cinderella could hear the music creep through the doors.



A lady's maid handed her a bouquet of white roses—a gift from Prince Severin and Princess Elle of Loire (as flowers were hard to come by in the middle of winter, Cinderella had no idea where they procured them)—and adjusted her veil.

Cinderella drew her shoulders back and took a deep breath before the door was pushed open.

Sure enough, Cinderella's side was only half-filled—a stark contrast to Friedrich's side, where military officers, governmental employees, and various lords and ladies were packed in like sellers in a market.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:39 am*

All of the Trieux noble families were present. Marcus and Cerise sat together—waving on the sly so they would not be chastised by their parents. Lord Leroy was perhaps the least surprised and scandalized of the bunch. He brushed tears from his droopy eyes and smiled widely at Cinderella as she walked past.

When Cinderella glanced at Friedrich's side, she realized many of the Erlauf officers and soldiers she met during the past fall, summer, and spring wore small squares of scarlet red cloth sewn over their hearts on the jacket of their uniform. Ensign Kurt stood with Gustav and Ivo. All three men saluted her when she passed him Lord Diederick and Colonel Merrich, seated near the front of the cathedral, bowed—although Merrich offered Cinderella a sly wink.

The second and third rows from the front were filled with foreign dignitaries—mostly ambassadors, but a few princes and princesses had deigned to attend. Prince Severin and Princess Elle were there. It was shocking, but Princess Elise of Arcainia had accepted the invitation—which had been delivered to her thanks to her loan-shark ties to their country—and stood with her youngest foster brother, Prince Gerhart. Prince Viggo from Ringsted attended, as did Princess Astra of Baris.

To Cinderella's relief, Lady Klara, Mariska, and even snarky Silla stood in the very first row of seats. Lady Klara offered Cinderella a brief, underwhelming smile, but her eyes were soft and happy. Mariska was beside herself with joy. She cast a handful of flower petals before Cinderella—to Silla and Lady Klara's horror.

Marie and Armel were also seated in the first row. Armel looked spooked—marrying a duchess had scared him pants-less, but the fact that his wife's best friend would one day be queen terrified him to the core—but Marie was crying and blowing kisses in

Cinderella's direction.

Queen Freja, her Consort Commander Lehn, and Prince Johann stood directly opposite from Cinderella's step-family and friends.

Commander Lehn gave Cinderella a warm smile. Prince Johann wriggled his eyebrows—earning a grin from Cinderella—and Queen Freja nodded once, indicating her approval.

Friedrich was now just a few steps away. His eye was hooked on Cinderella, his expression intent, although there was a customary curl to his lips. When Cinderella hesitated at the base of the dais Friedrich climbed down them, took her hand, and helped her up.

When they reached the top, Cinderella could see out into the open air courtyard. The shutters and drapes had been removed for the day so anyone who wanted to could see Prince Cristoph Friedrich VI and Duchess Cinderella exchange their vows. It made the cathedral chilly—as winter had arrived—but Cinderella hoped it might be a small step towards mending the country's bitterness.

The courtyard was packed with Erlauf and Trieux citizens alike, bundled up due to the weather. It warmed Cinderella's heart to see the two cultures intermingled, celebrating the day together. Admittedly, the two peoples were a bit stiff, but still. It was progress!

"Are you ready?" Friedrich whispered, squeezing her hand.

"I think so," Cinderella shivered.

The clergyman smiled at Friedrich and Cinderella before he cleared his voice and spoke. "Today Prince Cristoph Friedrich VI and Cinderella Lacreux, the Duchess of

Aveyron, come before this fine state to declare their love and intention to marry. Now, who stands for Lady Lacreux and gives her in marriage to Prince Cristoph and acts as her witness?"

Cinderella had a moment of blind panic. She had told the clergyman specifically he was to skip this part of the ceremony, because there wasn't anyone to give her away! It was enough that Lady Klara and her daughters stood on her side with some affection, she wouldn't push for anymore. But what did that leave Cinderella with? Sybilla the fairy godmother wasn't around to magic another goat!

Cinderella winced in the silence and was about to whisper to the minster to move on when Friedrich touched her arm. When she met his gaze he tilted his head toward the open air courtyard.

When Cinderella looked, a resounding, almost deafening, "WE DO," blasted in through the open windows.

Cinderella broke ranks and hurried to the banister—Friedrich at her side.

There, standing in the courtyard with the rest of the well-wishers, was every servant of Aveyron. They were headed by Gilbert and Jeanne, and all of them—from the head butler to the youngest chicken girl—wore bracelets or bands of scarlet red silk tied around their foreheads and the arms of their coats. They carried flags with the Aveyron crest, and bowed and curtsied when they saw that Cinderella looked down at them.

"They couldn't all have possibly fit in the cathedral, so they asked to be outside where they might all stand together as your witness," Friedrich said, speaking directly into Cinderella's ear that she might hear him.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 3:40 am*

Now that she was closer to the courtyard, Cinderella could see almost all of her market-stall friends and neighbors had come as well. The milkmaid and ropemaker stood together, waving scarlet swatches above their heads. The baker, the cobbler, the potter, the tanner and his wife, and the mousy woman who had correctly warned Cinderella of Friedrich's intentions months ago cheered and shouted with abandon.

Cinderella covered her mouth with her hands to keep from crying. Once again, she had underestimated the love and loyalty of her servants. Her shoulders shook with effort, and Cinderella's face hurt, for she wanted to laugh and cry at once.

"Thank you," she finally shouted, blowing kisses to her staunch supporters.

"I am so lucky," Friedrich said, curling his arms around Cinderella.

"Not as lucky as I am. Luck doesn't even begin to describe it. I am blessed," Cinderella said, smiling up at him.

Friedrich's smile was so warm it made Cinderella's toes curl. "Can we spend the rest of our lives arguing who is more blessed?"

"Let's."

Friedrich chuckled and kissed the tip of Cinderella's nose.

"AHEM," the clergyman said.

"Hmm. We should get back to the ceremony," Friedrich said.

“That sounds right. Shall we?” Cinderella said.

“We shall,” Friedrich agreed, sweeping Cinderella back to the clergyman.

The ceremony was over faster than Cinderella’s dazed mind could take in. She felt so loved and so lucky, the thing she mostly remembered was the intensity of the cheers when the clergyman declared Cinderella and Friedrich married. It was an explosion of noise, shouts, and bells when Friedrich kissed Cinderella, and all of it was happy.

As Friedrich led Cinderella down the aisle, he wiped tears from her eyes. “What’s wrong, Pet?”

“It’s a storybook ending that I don’t deserve,” she said. “I have everything I wanted. I have you; Aveyron is finally safe; my servants love me, and we get to build our country together. It’s so perfect.”

Friedrich smiled. “You deserve every happiness you receive, darling. Although I’m sad to say, it won’t always be like this. Some days our people will get along; other days they won’t. And sometime soon, we will have to deal with the threat of darkness.”

“But we will move forward. We are proof our countries can move forward,” Cinderella said.

“You are right,” Friedrich relented when they reached the church doors. “I love you, Princess Cinderella, even if you have an answer to all my pessimistic thoughts.”

“And I love you, Prince Cristoph Friedrich VI, even if you do have a name that is unnecessarily long,” Cinderella laughed.

The footmen opened the church doors, avoiding their kissing, future monarchs and the four collared mice that scurried around the royal pair.

If darkness came to Erlauf, it didn't stand a chance.