

The Assignment

A Sleeping Beauty Short Story by K. M. Shea

When Firra and Donaigh received the summons from Enchanter Evariste, they had markedly different reactions.

Donaigh was thrilled, for the Lord Enchanter Evariste was the master and teacher of the Lady Enchantress-In-Training, Angelique. Angelique was something of a hero for Donaigh, and Evariste was legendary for becoming an enchanter when he was little more than a child, so Donaigh practically skipped all the way to the quiet corner of Torrens the pair called their home.

Firra, however, was not quite as happy. She respected both the enchanter and enchantress-in-training, and she was obliged to Evariste. (When she served as an apprentice mage, she was sent to extinguish a forest fire, and through a bumbling error, she instead fanned the flames. Thankfully, Enchanter Evariste was on-hand and undid the damage, but the memory still made her face burn.)

But even so, she was not fooled. Though Evariste had an unflappable temperament and was always in high spirits, he was both clever and sly. If he was summoning Donaigh and herself, it wasn't just to chat.



“Thank you for coming today, Mage Donaigh and Mage Firra,” Evariste said with a clear smile. The enchanter—always an elegant figure—was dressed down in the comforts of his home. He wore black trousers and black boots, and a sleeveless hooded jacket that was snug in the shoulders and torso and hit his knees—though it was split like a swallow’s tail. It was decorated with red swirls that moved if Firra stared long enough. “Welcome to my home. Please, join us in the salon.”

Evariste led the way to a sunny sitting room that was much like its owner—elegant but comfortable. It was awash with sunshine from the windows that were crafted in elaborate shapes, but it also seemed to glow within due to the golden stain of the polished furniture. The back wall of the salon also had windows—though they did not look outside but were portals into various parts of the continent.

One framed with wood looked into the beautiful white forests of Farset; another framed with alabaster showed the white plumed castle of Baris; and another set on glass fashioned to look like ice was a portal to Fresler's Helm of Verglas.

Evariste didn't so much as glance at the portal windows, but Firra knew his house was the only in the continent to feature portal magic—the ability to open up doors into other parts of the world. He was the only mage alive who had such magic, and he possessed it in such strength that it made him a prodigy when he was a child and a legend as an adult.

Firra dawdled in front of the portal window that looked out at Fresler's Helm. "You have a beautiful home." She smiled at the enchanter, then joined Donaigh on a blue-cushioned settee.

Evariste smiled pleasantly, though Firra couldn't tell if it reached his eyes or not because of the black hood that shaded his face. "Thank you! I'm rather fond of it myself, though I find I enjoy it more now that I'm not the only one rattling about it."

"This house has never rattled," said a husky, melodic voice.

"Indeed, or I shouldn't be willing to stay in it!" a second voice sniffed.

"Roland, do mind your manners." Lady Enchantress Angelique entered the salon with a smile, bearing an elaborate tea tray in her hands. On her heels was a black-and-white cat.

The cat was sleek and well groomed, but the magnificent expression on its face was somewhat ruined by the black half-mustache that colored its white muzzle.

"Ah, I don't recall if either of you have had the pleasure of meeting my lovely apprentice, Enchantress Angelique. Angel, this is Fire Mage Firra and War Mage Donaigh—they're the pair I told you about," Evariste said.

The enchantress-in-training—as beautiful as the sun—smiled. "Greetings. I am honored to meet you."

Donaigh popped up from the settee so he could bow to her. "The honor is all ours."

"*Ahem*," the cat coughed.

"Oh, yes," Evariste said with his trademark easy smile. "May I also present to you Angel's pet cat, Roland."

"I, rude sir, am not a *pet*!" the cat sneered. "I am a *magic* cat—I serve as a guide and reference for Lady Enchantress Angelique."

Evariste took the tea tray from Angelique and set it on a low end table. “He does that, too,” he acknowledged as he seated himself in a straight-backed, wooden chair accented with clawed feet.

“I see,” Firra said. She was slightly disturbed when the cat jumped up on a cushioned stool and fixed his gaze on her and Donaigh.

“He’s a very handsome fellow,” Donaigh said.

Roland preened. “It is encouraging to see at least one of you has some semblance of intelligence.”

“Roland!” Angelique hissed.

The cat licked one of its paws and scrubbed at its face.

Angelique narrowed her eyes at it, but she put another smile on her face when she turned her attention to Firra and Donaigh. “I hope your trip was pleasant?”

“It was, thank you,” Firra said.

“Excellent. What would you like to drink?” Angelique gestured to the three small teapots that were settled on the tea tray. “We have black tea, drinking chocolate, strawberry tea, and—should you like it—we have several bottles of Sole and Loire wines.”

Firra glanced at Donaigh, but he was still starry-eyed from being in the same room with Evariste and Angelique. “Drinking chocolate, please.” Firra smiled. “To remind me of home.”

Angelique set about pouring some of the velvety liquid into a delicate tea cup, but Evariste tilted his head. “I had nearly forgotten. You are from Sole, if I recall correctly—yes?”

“Bred and born,” Firra said with a hint of pride. As a mage, she technically wasn’t supposed to have loyalties to any one country—it was partially why magic users were sent to the academy as children—but Firra was still fond of her homeland. “Donaigh is from Ringsted.”

“The shipping giant—though it surprises me it isn’t better known for its striking shores and green lands,” Evariste said.

“We were just in Ringsted not two weeks ago,” Angelique said. “It is a beautiful country.” Her smile was as delicate as the teacup of drinking chocolate she handed Firra. “And what would you like to drink, Mage Donaigh?”

“Black tea, please.”

“With cream and sugar?”

“Yes, please.”

Firra wanted to snicker—for Donaigh was certainly on his best manners—but her friend deserved no censure for his happiness, so she kept her peace. She sipped her chocolate—smooth with a faint flavor of cinnamon—and relaxed in the sunshine as Angelique pattered around the tea tray, loading up a plate of treats and delicacies for Donaigh.

Everything about this is designed to please. Firra scratched her cheek as she entertained the thought. She wasn't surprised that Angelique would try and put her best foot forward. The whole magic community knew she had a rough time of it at the academy—she deserved the chance to stretch her wings. But it seemed odd that *Evariste* would also go through such trouble.

With this thought pushing her forward, Firra ventured to ask, "If you'll excuse my bluntness, sir, but why did you invite us here?"

"I am hoping you will take on an assignment. Thank you, Angel." Evariste smiled at his apprentice when she passed him a teacup.

Donaigh tilted his head. Though his lips were curved in a smile, the light in his eyes said he was taking in the conversation with gravity. "What kind of assignment?"

"A long-term one, I'm afraid," Evariste sipped his tea, then put it aside. "Have you heard of the plight of Princess Rosalinda—granddaughter of King Giuseppe of Sole?"

"I think every magic user on the continent has," Donaigh said.

"It is fortunate Lady Enchantress Angelique was able to modify her curse," Firra added with real feeling. The nobles of Sole took the line of inheritance with the greatest severity. If something were to happen to the young princess, the political realm of Sole would crack.

Angelique's smile was forced as she poured cream into a saucer and set it in front of her cat. The cat sniffed it and scrunched up his nose, but after glancing up at the young enchantress's face, he held his silence.

Angelique delicately folded her hands together. "I wish another enchanter or enchantress had been there to better modify the curse, but I did the best I could at the time." When she sat down, the cat leaped from its stool and meandered over to her. He almost sat on the hem of her skirts and twitched his tail back and forth.

"Based on what I have heard, you pulled off a brilliant bit of magic," Firra said "It was a sound modification—one that Carabosso won't be able to change."

"So what is the problem?" Donaigh asked, voicing the thought Firra hadn't quite finished.

The smile eased off Evariste's lips. "There have been...complications. Not with the curse—Mage Firra was right. Angel did a wonderful job."

"I should say so!" the cat chimed in.

Angelique reached down to tickle the cat under his chin. The cat started to purr and arched its back before it corrected itself and regained its grave composure.

"The issue is with the princess herself. Her parents kept finding spindles in her bed and among her toys. The Magic Knights of Sole guarded her, but there were still several close calls...so Princess Rosalinda was taken into hiding."

Donaigh fussed with the brim of his straw hat. "I believe I recall hearing that. Didn't your mother mention it in a letter to you, Firra?"

Firra nodded. "Rumor has it she was spirited off to Verglas so Carabosso and his minions couldn't reach her, but Mother said she had also been told the princess was taken down to Ringsted. But that was at least two or three years ago."

"Yes. False rumors were planted so no one would know where she really went," Evariste said. "The princess has been safe, but the king is worried. It was easy to guarantee her safety when she was nothing more than a toddler and went no farther than her backyard. But she is growing up, and her cover story will be suspicious if she's not allowed out of eyesight of her home—not to mention she would eventually strain under such rules, I imagine."

Angelique glanced from the mages to her master, and slowly said. "She needs to be guarded—discreetly."

Evariste pressed his fingertips together, creating a steeple. "Exactly so. I was hoping you two would take the assignment."

Donaigh whistled. "If I may be so bold—when you said long-term, you weren't kidding."

"Indeed," Evariste said. "If all goes well, you would be a part of the princess's life and guard her until she turns eighteen. That is over a decade from now."

Donaigh scratched his chin and glanced at Firra. Firra rubbed her thumb and the tip of her pointer finger. She wanted to click her fingers and create a bit of flame—tapping her magic always seemed to clear her head—but she didn't dare perform magic in an enchanter's home without permission.

The offer was tempting—not just because she was being asked by Lord Enchanter Evariste himself, or even because she would be aiding her homeland—but because it was a long-term assignment with Donaigh.

Firra and Donaigh had become fast friends at the academy, but as students of different disciplines, they hadn't been able to see each other much when they served as apprentices. Living without Donaigh was like missing a limb. Firra wasn't sure how a cheeky Ringsted brat had come to mean so much to her, but the bond was there. There weren't many assignments that would require a new fire mage and war mage...but if they had a decade of working together under their belts, they could probably cite it as a precedent and snag future assignments together.

Firra met Donaigh's gaze and saw the same glimmer of hope in them. He knew what she was thinking, and he hoped for the same outcome.

But Firra wasn't ready to commit so easily. "Why us?" she asked. "We're untried fledgling mages."

"Yes, but that's exactly why the pair of you came to mind." Evariste leaned back in his chair, a smile back on his lips. "The princess needs to be guarded, but the chance of possible threats at this moment is quite low. I imagine it will ramp up as the years pass, giving you two plenty of time to learn, improve, and gather experience."

Donaigh leaned forward and rested his forearms on his knees. "But why are *you* giving out this assignment...sir? Shouldn't it be the Veneno Conclave's job? It is for issues such as this one that it exists, after all."

"I'm afraid that's my fault," Angelique said. She blushed slightly as she picked up her cat.

"Stop this mistreatment—put me down!" the cat complained.

Angelique ignored it and instead petted it. "As I was the magic user who modified the curse, the managing of the issue would naturally fall to me. However, I'm afraid I lack the experience and expertise required, and this is an issue with which one cannot be too careful."

Evariste tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "The conclave offered to handle the matter—I believe several mages were being considered for it—but Angel was so concerned, I decided I should handle it."

Angelique offered the enchanter a grateful expression as she hugged her cat to her chest. (The cat protested and tried to wiggle out of her grasp without luck.) "The conclave resisted a

little, but Princess Alessia and Prince Consort Filippo both said they would prefer Master Evariste and I be involved.”

“And so here we are,” Evariste said. “If you like, I can give you two time to think it over, but I’m afraid I can’t spare you more than a day or two. If you aren’t interested, I need to find other suitable candidates.”

Firra and Donaigh traded gazes and nodded.

“There’s no need. We’ll guard Princess Rosalinda.”

Angelique’s smile blazed like the sun, and she released her cat—who gratefully hopped off her lap—and clapped. “Thank you! It will be a relief to know that such competent mages are watching her.”

Donaigh scratched the back of his neck and blushed a little. “I don’t know that we’re competent—Firra did say we’re just out of our apprenticeships.”

Angelique shook her head. “Master Evariste told me when he invited the two of you here that you are very accomplished mages. I’m glad it will be the two of you watching the princess.”

“As am I.” A frown tugged on the edges of Evariste’s fine lips. “I worried over whom to choose—for it will be a tricky assignment as the princess must stay hidden and safe. Those with *gray* morals might seek to take advantage of the situation, but I know the two of you are true.”

“Where is the princess?” Firra asked.

Angelique turned her smile on to Firra. “Why Sole, of course.”

Firra almost popped out of her chair. “She’s still in *Sole*?”

Evariste laughed. “Yes, that was a fine bit of trickery pulled off by King Giuseppe and the Magic Knights. He decided to keep her in Sole, for it would be the last place Carabosso would look for her. The rumors were spread so searching for her would be a wild goose-chase for anyone unscrupulous.”

Donaigh laughed and slapped his knee. “It was nicely played. Very well, Lord Enchanter, when do we receive the details of our assignment?”

Evariste stood. “Now—if you’ll pardon me for a moment, I will retrieve the papers.”

“I’ll get them,” Angelique said in her sing-song voice. She offered the mages another smile and slipped from the room with a swish of her skirts. “Come, Roland. I saw you poking about Master Evariste’s desk earlier. If you moved anything, I’ll need your help.”

“I do not *poke about*,” the cat declared. He twitched this tail back and forth, but followed after the enchantress. “I inspect with the greatest elegance.”

“Thank you, Angel,” Evariste called out after her. Instead of sitting down again, he glanced at the portal windows on the wall behind him. “I’m quite glad you agreed to the assignment,” he repeated. “The candidates the conclave chose were...”

“Do you suspect foul play?” Donaigh asked. There was a dangerous glitter to his eyes—he may be from Ringsted, but Firra knew he took note of Sole politics for her sake.

“No,” Evariste said. “But they were thinking of sending mages with rather benign magic.”

“I imagine those mages had more experience than we do?” Firra asked.

Evariste nodded. “Indeed. The conclave only agreed to you two *because* you haven’t much experience, and they don’t expect any trouble. But I wanted to send mages who could fight. Just in case...” he minutely shook his head as Angelique rejoined them. “Right then. Here are your orders.”



The cottage that contained Princess Rosalinda looked no different from the hundreds of others Firra and Donaigh had passed as they picked their way through Sole. A plume of smoke rose from the rock-crusted chimney, and a small lean-to that was devoid of animals was crouched near the home.

“Are we sure this is the right place?” Donaigh asked.

Firra slid off her horse. “It must be—Sir Roberto gave us painfully detailed directions.” She led her horse to the lean-to and tied her reins to the hitching post.

Donaigh copied her, and just as he finished tying up his mount, a spritely older man marched out of the cottage and peered at them. “Firra and Donaigh?”

Firra bowed slightly. “That’s us, I’m afraid.”

The older man smiled, lighting up his craggy face. “Welcome! Glad to have you here. My wife and Briar Rose are inside, but let me get your horses some water.”

Briar Rose...that’s what they are calling the princess. Even Rosalinda would grow up without knowing who she was. Firra knew it was necessary, but she wondered how they were going to tell Rosalinda when she was old enough without making her dumb with shock.

“I’ll help you,” Donaigh chirped before Firra could offer.

“I’d appreciate that! These bones don’t move like I wish. This way—oh, you, Firra? Head on in. My wife will be glad to see you.”

“As you wish. Thank you,” Firra said, but the old man didn’t hear; he was already banging around the lean-to looking for buckets.

Firra knocked on the cottage door and reluctantly let herself in. “Hello?” She called out, blinking in the dim light of the cottage.

“They’re here—they’re here, Nonna!” A sweet, childish voice shouted.

“Yes, I hear you, Briar Rose—Rose, don’t run!”

A pretty little girl with a head of wild, chestnut curls pranced over to Firra—her rare amethyst eyes twinkling. “You are Nonno’s friend—you’re a mage!” she declared. “I am Briar Rose, and I am going to be a mage because Sir Roberto says mages are rich. Are you rich? Because if you are not, we have to tell Sir Roberto!”

An older woman groaned and said with great exasperation, “*Briar Rose!*”

The little girl—the *princess*—guilty looked behind her. “Can I not ask if mages are rich?”

The old woman shook her head. “No, you can’t. Now, properly introduce yourself.”

The little girl squirmed guilty, then gave Firra a curtsy. “I am Briar Rose. I know I just told you that but this time I am properly introducing myself. I live here with Nonno and Nonna. What is your name?”

Firra couldn’t help the smile that bloomed on her lips. “I’m Firra, a Fire Mage.”

Briar Rose’s purple eyes widened. “A *fire* mage? Wow! That sounds fun—and warm!” she giggled, then cocked her head. “Do you live in a big house?”

“*Briar Rose!*”

“But you said I couldn’t ask if she was rich,” Briar Rose said.

The old woman groaned. “Don’t ask *anyone* about anything related to money, property, or possessions. Worldly possessions don’t matter—you remember that! Do I make myself clear?”

Briar Rose sighed. “Yes Nonna.” The little girl pursed her lips slightly then peered up at Firra. “I am sorry for asking about your worldly possessions. Can we still be friends?”

Firra crouched down so she could see the little princess eye-to-eye. “You want to be friends with me?”

“Yes!” Briar Rose said. “I have six friends! I used to have seven friends, but yesterday Cosima bit me, so I don’t want to count her anymore. You don’t bite, do you?” she eyed Firra with suspicion.

Firra chuckled. “No, Donaigh and I don’t bite.”

Briar clapped her hands again. “Then we will be great friends!” Unabashedly, Briar Rose threw herself at Firra, linking her arms behind Firra’s neck and giving her a warm hug that smelled like sunshine and flowers.

In that moment, Firra knew Princess Rosalinda had walked into her heart and claimed a piece of it for herself, just as Donaigh had done when they were children.

Firra would do anything to keep this precious, precocious little girl safe.

If Carabosso comes for her, he’ll have to step over my dead body first.



Years passed, and Firra and Donaigh watched the tiny, wild little girl turn into a beautiful, clever young lady. They treated her like a favorite younger sibling, and her delight at seeing them never faltered.

“We’ll have to tell her soon, you know,” Firra said.

Donaigh patted his horse on the neck, then adjusted his ever-present straw hat. “Tell who what?”

“Tell Briar Rose what she really is.”

Donaigh sighed.

They rode on in silence for a few moments more. “What will we do when they take her back to Ciane?” he asked.

Firra blinked. “We’ll go with her, of course.” It had never occurred to Firra that they would do anything besides stay with Briar. Worried, she looked to Donaigh, who was wearing a sly grin.

“Good,” he said. “I wanted to make sure we’re on the same page.”

Firra snorted. “Half the time, I don’t think we’re in the same book.”

“Nonsense,” Donaigh said. “You and Me, Firra...we’re the two sides of a coin. Always together.”

“Always together,” Firra echoed. “And Briar Rose?”

“Why, we’re her coin, of course,” Donaigh said.

Firra laughed. “The conclave would paddle your behind if they heard you say that.”

“Well, we’re not vowing loyalty to a country, are we?” he winked.

“No, but it’s close enough,” Firra said. The Venveno Conclave would view Firra and Donaigh’s love for Briar Rose with great disdain if they knew of it.

Donaigh snorted. “Good for them. Maybe it will motivate them to get off their behinds and do some good for once. But as for Briar...”

“She’s ours,” Firra said, finishing the sentence for him. The mages traded nods. Donaigh held out his hand, and Firra nudged her horse closer to his so she could briefly clasp it.

After a moment, Donaigh released her and yawned widely. “We have to perform another patrol today—lovely.”

“There’ve been reports of magical stirrings in the area,” Firra said. “And we can’t be too careful.”

“I know,” Donaigh said.

The hairs on the back of Firra’s neck stood on end, and she stiffened when she heard a distant cry. “What was that?”

Donaigh narrowed his eyes. “What was what?”

Firra strained her ears and listened, trying to catch the sound again. “I thought I heard a hellhound...but it must have been nothing.”

The mages rode on, their magic stirring. Back in a nondescript cottage, Briar Rose did her chores, never guessing how her life was about to change.

The End