

A Mage Welcome
A Timeless Fairy Tales Short Story
By K. M. Shea

Gemma added the last bit of trim to the Ranger cloak she was working on, and cast a critical eye over it. It needed to be well made, for it was a gift she intended to give to the Loire Princess Elle—after Stil had enchanted it.

It should hold quite a few spells—though it lacks embroidery and ornamentation. Gemma thought. Truthfully she still didn't grasp what made her work able to hold so many spells. There seemed to be no pattern. It didn't matter if it was an elaborate, or something simple and subdued. Stil boasted that everything she made held great quantities of magic and high quality spells.

"Magic," Gemma shook her head.

"Did you say something, Gemma?" Stil asked as he strolled into her workroom with the elegance of a cat.

"This is for Princess Elle. Can you enchant it so it will blend in with the shadows?" Gemma asked, holding out the cloak.

Stil inspected a seam. "It's as well made as ever."

"Can you do it?"

"Camouflage spells are tricky as they involve actively spelling more than one target. I'm not certain such a charm can be woven into fabric. I imagine I could have a subtlety charm easily imbedded in it, though."

"What will that do?"

"People will be less likely to notice her. Gazes will naturally skip over her—it's easier because it's a general effect that is always on—like a heat charm."

Gemma pressed her lips together. "I expect she would find that equally as useful..." she trailed off and looked at Stil, studying his face.

Though he had taken a brief holiday when they were married, since returning to Loire some weeks ago, it seemed Stil barely had a moment to pause. Most of his time was spent enchanting weapons and equipment in preparation for what seemed to be the grim rumblings of war. Dark circles under his eyes were now normal, and his skin tone did not seem quite as healthy as it had been when Gemma first met him in fall.

"Do you want me to do it? It won't take long. I can also easily add a heat charm and a water-resistance charm, maybe a few others," Stil said, inspecting the fabric.

"If it's not too troublesome," Gemma carefully said.

Stil laughed—a rich, pleasant noise that made Gemma's stomach belly-flop. "Gemma, I'm your husband. All my skills—and my magic—are yours. Doing a little thing like this doesn't come close to being troublesome."

Gemma felt her cheeks blush pink. She busied herself with putting away thread and tossing scraps of material. "I know you are busy with enchantments for Prince Severin."

Stil tilted his head. "Aye. We just received a shipment of Erlauf equipment to charm and spell, but the other craftmages can handle it. This cape will take me just a short while."

"Thank you."

"It is a pretty gift. Princess Elle is sure to love it." Stil drew closer to Gemma, making her back against her worktable.

"She will treasure it for its enchantments," Gemma said.

Stil snorted. “The Princess is no idiot, Gemma. She will love the enchantments, but she’ll know they’re only possible because you made the cape.” He snaked his arms around Gemma before she could squirm away, and held her close. He sighed as he rested his cheek against her head.

“Tired?” Gemma asked.

“A little. But all this preparation will save us losses later.”

Gemma patted Stil on the back. She awkwardly rolled her shoulders and then snuggled closer, letting Stil find solace in their embrace. They hugged for several long, quiet moments of bliss.

“Princess Elle wants to see you, by the way,” Stil said, his voice warm and lazy when he finally broke the silence.

“When?”

“As soon as possible.” Stil mewled in disappointment when Gemma extracted herself from his grasp. “Get back here. She doesn’t have to see you *right* this instant.”

Gemma brushed off her dress. “It is not wise to keep royalty waiting.”

“I’m a mage. It’s not wise to keep mages waiting either,” Stil complained as he leaned against Gemma’s vacated workbench.

“I’m not married to Princess Elle.”

Stil sighed. “I thought I would get to hog you all to myself when we left pushy Linnea behind in Verglas. It seems all that has happened, though, is that I have exchanged one rival for another.”

Gemma offered her husband a smile. She shyly placed a hand on his smooth jaw-line. “I am sorry we must part, but you have to return to your workroom, don’t you?”

“No. Princess Elle summoned me as well,” Stil said, recovering some of his cheer. He offered out his hand. “Shall we?”

Gemma placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead the way.

Chanceux Chateau was a charming place, but it was crowded with visitors—noble, magical, military, and more. To find Princess Elle, Gemma and Stil had to skirt a squadron of soldiers, pass a huddle of weather mages, and slip past the merchants who were waiting to meet with Prince Severin.

Gemma cleared her throat and tried to calm her heart as it beat twice as fast as usual when they approached Princess Elle’s private salon. Gemma was acquainted with the princess—she had spent most mealtimes memorizing the fashion-idol’s wardrobe—but this was the first time she was being asked into such an intimate setting, for Princess Elle didn’t invite just *anyone* to her salon.

The salon was bright with the spring sun shining in three floor-to-ceiling windows. The lower walls were covered with wood paneling, and the vaulted ceiling displayed an amusing mural of a chubby pony and a fat, fluffy dog that chased a black cat around the perimeter of the room. Giant gold mirrors nearly as large as the windows were posted on either end of the salon, increasing the light in the room.

Princess Elle was gazing out the windows when they first entered the room, but she turned and faced them with a vibrant smile. “Mage Stil, Mistress Gemma, thank you for coming.”

Princess Elle was an unusual sort of beauty. If she hadn’t been married to Prince Severin, the courts of nobility likely would have passed over her. However, as she had married something of the country hero, everyone in Loire was already predisposed to like her, which made them see

her with open eyes. Her smile was too wide and her nose a little too long for her to be a classic beauty, but the brilliance of her character, the richness of her laughter, and the vibrant way she lived life made her exquisite. When one was with Princess Elle they couldn't help but think she was utterly enchanting.

"Princess," Gemma murmured as she dropped in a curtsy.

"None of that, now." Elle shook her finger at her. "You've been our guest for weeks, Gemma. No formality between us. I insist."

"As you wish," Gemma said.

"What did you need?" Stil asked. He plopped down in a settee and patted the cushion next to him, encouraging Gemma to sit as well.

Gemma followed his example, but kept her eyes on Princess Elle. The princess clasped her hands behind her back. "You two are aware that the Ringsted storms broke, yes?" Princess Elle asked as she narrowed her eyes.

"Yes—the selkies captured the sea witch who caused them," Stil said, throwing an arm over Gemma's shoulders.

"Lady Enchantress Angelique told us," Gemma added.

Princess Elle nodded. "It's a wonderful thing for our alliance. Ringsted has an extensive navy that was wasting away with all the storms. If they join us, their shipping abilities will be a great boon."

"I don't know why they wouldn't join," Stil said. "I thought they already responded that they would attend the upcoming summit?"

"They did."

"Do you anticipate their refusal when they hear Prince Severin's proposal?" Gemma asked.

"No," Princess Elle said. "I expect they will be quite open to the alliance after suffering from the storms for months on end. No, the happy problem is who they are sending as their representatives."

"Who is it?" Stil asked.

"Crown Prince Callan."

Stil tilted his head. "I remember him. He's a good sort of man."

"He's not the only representative. Coming with him—as a Ringsted representative *and* a selkie representative, is his intended, the selkie Princess Dylan," Princess Elle continued.

Stil whistled. "A selkie is coming inland? That *is* a happy problem."

Gemma frowned. "A selkie?"

"Selkies are a mythical people who live exclusively in the Ringsted oceans," Stil said. "They're humans who are all born with the ability to shapeshift into seals."

Gemma shifted on the settee. "I know that. But...I didn't think selkies ever left the beach, much less Ringsted."

"Princess Dylan is different. She lives exclusively on land. Our reports say she lost her ability to shapeshift when capturing the sea witch," Princess Elle said. "Selkies can shapeshift only if their seal pelt remains unharmed. Princess Dylan's was ruined in the skirmish."

Stil winced. "I hadn't heard that. The poor thing."

Gemma was not surprised by Elle's superior intelligence. Before marrying Prince Severin she had been a Loire Ranger—which was a title used to dress up the darkness and danger of the role of spy.

“By all accounts she and Prince Callan are a wonderful couple, and are wildly popular among their people,” Princess Elle continued. “I don’t think they will be difficult to deal with, but keeping Princess Dylan’s heritage in mind, I believe it would be prudent to send a personal envoy at Loire’s borders. Once she leaves our only port city, she’ll be cut off from salt water. I don’t know how easy it will be on her. I cannot greet her myself, but I was hoping, Gemma, that you would be willing to fill the role for me.”

Gemma stared at Princess Elle. “You want *me* to greet a **princess**?”

“You’re not just a commoner anymore, Gemma. You’re married to a mage,” Stil said.

“You are also the best friend of Queen Linnea, and my companion as well,” Princess Elle said. “Mage Stil is correct—you have quite a bit of respectability and social heft. The only reason you do not know it is because you’re staying in Chanceux. Here we hold very little value in decorum.” The princess winked, and molded her lips in a sly grin.

Gemma felt warmth rush her heart with the praise, and allowed herself a tiny smile of pleasure.

“Will you accept my request, Gemma?” Princess Elle asked.

“I would be honored, your majesty,” Gemma said, already wondering what kinds of clothes selkies wore.

“I am jealous of you,” Princess Elle said with a longing sigh. “Princess Dylan seems like she’ll be a great deal of fun. I tried to convince Severin I should go, but *nooo*.” She scowled, lost in her irritation for the moment. “That obstinate cat.”

“I beg your pardon, Princess?” Gemma said.

“Gemma, I said you were to call me Elle! As for Princess Dylan and Prince Callan, they will be accompanied by two of their close companions: Lord Dooley and his personal assistant, Cagney. You’ll meet their party at the docks with some Loire soldiers as your escort.”

“I assume I’m coming with,” Stil said.

Gemma was quick to say, “You have work to finish here.”

“What? You *want* me to stay behind?” Stil yelled. “We’ve been married for just a few weeks! We shouldn’t have to part yet.”

“It will be just a short trip,” Gemma said.

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem for me to come with.”

“You have a responsibility.”

“What if I’m not responsible?” Stil asked with a winning smile.

Gemma scowled and was about to reply, but she was cut off by Princess Elle’s infectious laughter. “Oh, I shall miss you two! You are such a riot! Yes, Mage Stil. I thought it would be likely you would wish to go with your wife, so I asked my husband. He reluctantly agreed—though we would be much obliged if you would take some of the work with you and enchant them during your travels.”

“Absolutely,” Stil nodded. “There’s a box of cloak pins waiting to be charmed—tedious, but easy work. I can easily finish them during the trip. We’ll probably even have enough time to play the guessing game, Gemma!”

“I can’t wait,” Gemma said, as enthusiastic as a frozen lake.

“I thank you for your cooperation,” Princess Elle said, amusement lurking in her vibrant, green-colored eyes. “I am certain the prince and princess will be in good hands.”

“Thank you for entrusting such an important task to us,” Gemma said.

“Now that business is finished, would you two care for some tea?” Princess Elle asked.

“I sadly must refuse,” Stil said, his lips taking on a mournful slant. “I should go tell the other craftmages of my departure, and start preparations.”

Gemma shifted in her chair. “Should I come with you?”

“Not yet. I’ll try to break the news to them softly, first. Seeing you will only make it worse,” Stil said.

Princess Elle looked back and forth between Gemma and Stil. “Ahh, yes. The other craftmages will be heartbroken to see you go, Gemma, even if it is for a short time only.”

As if making up for a lifetime of scant friendships and an abundance of critical observers, Gemma had, upon first arriving in Chanceux Chateau, acquired a group of reverent admirers—the craftmages.

Everyone, from ancient Walahfrid to sweet faced Eadgyd—one of a few female craftmages—fussed over her. They were hopelessly in love with the clothing items Gemma produced, and often tried to bargain hard with her to purchase them. (Little did they know Gemma was working in secret to create capes for each one of them!)

Gemma found their attentions a little overwhelming, and sometimes she questioned their mental judgment, but she liked the other craftmages. Occasionally she secretly wondered if their affection for her was similar to being the youngest child in a large family.

She cleared her throat and folded her hands. “You exaggerate.”

“Sadly, I don’t,” Stil sighed. He swooped in to kiss her temple. “If only they would be half as sad to see *me* leave. Take care, my heart,” he said as he slipped from the room.

Gemma tried to brush her blush from her cheeks and gave Princess Elle her attention.

“You two are adorable,” Princess Elle chuckled. “I would be jealous—but I do love my cat.”

“You mean Esses?” Gemma asked, referring to the black forest cat Princess—now Queen—Cinderella and Prince Cristoph had given her.

“Him too. So—about your trip! You must tell me all that happens. I’ve never met a selkie before—even I couldn’t forge my way over the Chronos Mountains—so you must tell me everything when you get back.”

“Won’t you be able to meet her yourself?”

“I have hopes, but as the hostess I’m not certain how *much* time I’ll have with her.”

Princess Elle sighed and tapped her fingers on a wall.

“You find being a hostess tiring?”

“I find being a *princess* tiring. It makes my Ranger work look like chores for children. But, I do enjoy it. And the role comes with a very nice husband.” Laughter bubbled from Princess Elle like a spring, and Gemma soon joined in with her infectious laughter.



Gemma’s stomach writhed with nerves, but she breathed deeply and absent-mindedly patted Hvit as she watched for the selkie princess. Hvit leaned into Gemma, his tongue rolling from his mouth. His black facial markings were stark in the bright afternoon light, and he was drooling more than usual as the air was clouded with the smell of fish.

“You’ll do fine,” Stil said, placing an arm on Gemma’s shoulders.

“I want to make Princess Elle proud,” Gemma said.

“You will,” Stil assured her. “You’re certain we’re supposed to meet her here?”

“According to Prince Severin, yes. He wrote down our orders—don’t you remember?”

“No, not really. I was already working on those danged cloak pins when he came to see us off.” Stil frowned at his long, elegant fingers. “It’s no picnic working on those pig-stickers in a rocking carriage.”

“He said they will arrive in a Ringsted ship—but I’m not certain a naval ship could easily enter a river delta harbor,” Gemma said.

Loire’s only port city was on a river delta that flowed into the sea. The lands were rich and fertile, but some of the bigger ships couldn’t enter the port lest they would bottom out.

“Ship travel can be inconsistent. They might be a few days late,” Stil said. “Let’s play the guessing game while we wait. I’ll start.”

“Stil.”

“We’re playing it right this time. You have to ask questions and *then* you may guess what it is.”

“Stil.”

“Alright, I have something in mind. You may begin.”

“*Stil!*” Gemma grabbed his hand and squeezed it as her heart hammered with fear and surprise.

“What?”

She pointed out to the bustling harbor. Previously sailors, fishermongers, merchants, and all flavors and kinds of people strolled and darted across the docks. All activity had stopped as two giant serpents constructed of water coasted across the river waters, drawing closer to the docks with a serpent-like grace.

The *creatures* were not alone. Behind each serpent’s head sat two people, and although the docks were devoid of all activity, it was not silent. Something—or someone—was *singing*. It wasn’t a human song, it was high and keening—like the musical tones of a wolf.

Hvit sniffed the air and moved to stand in front of Gemma. She pressed herself into Stil’s side, seeking his reassurance. “What *is* that?” she whispered. The song was beautiful, but just as unearthly and *eerie* as the water serpents.

“That would be our Ringsted guests,” Stil said.



“You’re going to cause havoc on the docks,” Cagney said as Dylan stood on the deck of Dooley’s ship and sang, making her water serpents take shape.

“Maybe, but it’s the only way to reach the harbor,” Dylan said, caressing a serpent’s snout.

“It is not. We have several row boats.”

“It is the *fastest* way to the harbor,” Dylan conceded.

“Indeed it is!” Dooley chortled. He was a spot of green sea weed among the browns and golds of the wooden ship. He leaned over the side and patted one of Dylan’s serpents. “Come, Cagney. We can’t keep our greeters waiting. It would be a great rudeness! Besides—can you imagine an entrance greater than *this?*”

Cagney frowned. “There is no need for us to present ourselves with such haste as to cause a commotion among the masses.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think it will do any harm,” Callan said, joining the trio.

“Exactly,” Dylan said. She didn’t understand the reasoning in lack of harm, but she was eager to meet their escort, and didn’t relish waiting for a smaller boat. She wanted to get her first

look at Loire, and explore the foreign docks. The harbor didn't smell as salty as the Ringsted ports, and even this far from the docks Dylan could sniff out all sorts of foreign foods and scents.

Cagney tapped her fingers on the deck railing. "I believe all three of you are being hasty."

"I could always ride over on my kelpie," Dylan suggested. She leaned over the side of the ship and waved to the cross-looking water horse, who trod water at the prow of the ship.

"No. Onto the serpent, all of us," Callan said.

Dooley enthusiastically boosted himself onto the railing. "Could you bring them closer, flower of the sea? I lack the athletic ability your dearly beloved has."

"What do you mean?" Dylan asked as she easily jumped from the boat to one of the serpents. She sat at where the sea serpent's skull merged with its snake-like body. The cold water that made up the snake's body fizzed and gurgled.

"He means he has the agility of a walrus," Cagney grunted. She sidled towards Dylan, but Callan slipped in behind Dylan.

"She's my fiancé," he said when Cagney scowled at him.

"So I should be reduced to sitting with *him*?" she asked, pointing an accusing finger at Dooley.

"I'm hurt, Pearl of my heart," Dooley sniffed.

Dylan patted her serpent and sang a few notes. The rider-less serpent lowered its watery head onto the deck—making several of the sailors shout oaths. Dooley and Cagney scrambled on, riding on the top of the serpent's head—like Dylan and Callan.

"I say, this does feel strange. It is like riding a water-filled pillow," Dooley said. He tried to hook his arms around Cagney—who sat in front—but she elbowed his gut, making him cough in pain.

"Shall we?" Dylan asked.

"Yes, but take it slow," Callan said.

"And try not to be menacing," Cagney added, struggling to clutch the slippery, magic-made creature.

Dylan laughed and launched into a deep, keening song that reminded her of the music of a humpback whale. The sea serpents dove for the surface of the bay—drawing a squeak from Cagney—and snaked their way towards the harbor.

Keeping Callan's warning in mind, Dylan eased off the speed of her song and pitched the notes higher. Responding to her orders, the serpents slowed down and rose so they towered above the docks.

It was a very different sight from any of the Ringsted ports. There was so much more variety. There were furry donkeys, squawking birds, brightly colored flags, puffs of smoke from fires, and humans in such variety of clothes, shapes, and colors it was enough to make her head spin.

"There, I think they are our greeters," Callan said, pointing to a couple. The man wore an elaborately embroidered cloak. His companion was dressed more simply, but the way she stood reminded Dylan of Cagney. Pressed into her was a white canine, who stared at Dylan and her friends with a shocking amount of intelligence. Behind them was a squad of Loire soldiers.

"How do you know?" Dylan asked. To her, they looked like almost every other gawker—though the white dog was unusual.

"That's Mage Stil—I would recognize him anywhere. He's visited Ringsted on occasion. But even if I didn't know him, that white dog is highly unusual," Callan said.

"Right, I'll take us down," Dylan said.

The serpents drew closer, pushing their way between rafts and boats. She halted them so they hovered above the docks, and slowly brought them lower. When the serpents were just above the harbor surface she released them. The serpents lost their shape and sloshed the wooden docks with water. Cagney stiffly landed on her feet, but Dooley tumbled head over heels.

“Well done,” Callan said. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled before kissing Dylan on the cheek.

“So that’s why you were so eager to leave the ship,” Cagney said. “We left Oisín and Morri behind, so they are unable to monitor your amorous attentions.”

“I have no idea what you mean,” Callan said. He kissed Dylan again—this time on the lips.

Dylan happily hugged him. “We should find the greeters,” she reminded him.

Callan sighed. “I know—duty calls.” He regretfully brushed her cheek with his fingers before he led the way through the port.

It was much more quiet than Dylan thought it would be, and most everyone in the area gawked at them as if they were rarely spotted fish.

“It’s an odd place,” Dylan concluded.

“No, I fear it is we who are the odd ones,” Cagney said, brushing a fleck of sea foam off her dress.

“Here we go,” Callan said, taking Dylan’s hand and squeezing it.

The young lady with the white dog and posture reminiscent of Cagney’s stepped forward and curtsied. “Prince Callan, Princess Dylan, Lord Dooley, and Mistress Cagney, I presume?”

“Indeed, you have found us,” Prince Callan said with a warm smile.

“I am Gemma, wife of Craftmage Rumpelstiltskin,” their greeter said, gesturing to the man in the elaborately embroidered cloak.

“Hi there,” the mage said with a cheerful smile.

“We are here on behalf of Prince Severin and Princess Elle, and we will take you to Chanceux Chateau,” Gemma continued. Her white dog stayed pressed into her side and watched Dylan with blazing blue eyes.

“Splendid. Thank you for the warm welcome—it is good to see you again, Mage Stil,” Prince Callan said, offering the mage a smile. Dylan barely noticed when he left her side and shook Mage Stil’s hand, engaging him in small talk with Lord Dooley.

“Your dog is very beautiful,” Dylan said, tipping her head at the unusual creature.

“His name is Hvit,” Gemma said. She hesitated for a few moments, her expression blank as she slowly asked, “Would you like to pet him?”

“Could I?” Dylan plopped to the ground and held her hand out, waiting for the dog to come to her.

Gemma nudged the animal. “He’s quite friendly once he knows you mean no harm.”

Hvit sniffed Dylan’s hand, his wet nose and scratchy whiskers tickling her palm. When she giggled he wagged his curly tail and drew closer, nosing her clothes. “Cagney, you must pet him. His hair is softer than sea kelp,” Dylan marveled as she ran her fingers through his luxurious white fur—which almost seemed to *glow*.

“He is a beautiful creature,” Cagney said, also offering her hand for the dog to sniff. She passed inspection even faster than Dylan, and soon Hvit sat between the two of them, his tail enthusiastically slapping the docks.

A small smile curled across Gemma’s lips. “You must be tired from your trip. Could my husband and I take you to your rooms at the inn we’ve rented?”

“That would be nice,” Dylan said. *I could get some food there!* Dylan’s stomach growled loudly.

Cagney studiously ignored the sound, but Gemma looked slightly taken aback. She pressed her lips together and spoke with care. “I hope you don’t find it too impertinent, but I brought some traditional Verglas sweets for you.”

Dylan perked. “Sweets?”

Cagney tilted her head. “Verglas?”

Gemma turned and took a leather bag from one of the Loire soldiers that stood behind her. “Yes. I am from Verglas, though Stil and I are living at Chanceux Chateau at the moment.” She paused. “Oh, if you would rather have a Ringsted or Loire dish, we could—”

“No, no, I’m very interested,” Dylan said, jumping to her feet. Her nose twitched as she peered into the bag. “What do you have?”

“Cardamom cookies and *julekeke*—though this technically is the wrong season to eat it. It is a sweet bread flavored with cinnamon.”

The scent of cinnamon tickled Dylan’s nose. “They smell amazing, thank you.” She took the cookie Gemma offered her and crunched into it. It was crispy and crumbly, with a nutty flavoring she hadn’t tasted before.

“What breed of dog is Hvit? I’ve never seen anything like him before,” Cagney said.

“He was a hellhound.”

“I beg your pardon? *Was?*”

“I gave him a starfire—a kind of light-giving prism craftmages make. He turned into...this.” Gemma motioned to the dog.

Dylan ate another cookie and looked back and forth between Gemma and Cagney, and Callan, Dooley, and Mage Stil. *I think I will like these people.* She decided. *If Princess Elle and Prince Severin are like Gemma and Mage Stil, I shall like them as well. Which is more than I had hoped for. I thought they would be more similar to Maureen!*

Dylan finished her cookie and nodded. *Yes, I am now looking forward to this summit. United, we can stand against the likes of the sea witch—and worse!*

The End