

In Search of a Hero

A Swan Lake Short Story by K. M. Shea

Rothbart was a really unusual villain for me because he wasn't 100% malicious and sacrifices himself for his daughter. His story is very sad because he chose to give up rather than align himself with those who would do what is right, so I've really been looking forward to releasing this short so you all get a better picture of his inner thoughts.

Rothbart had always hated heroes. Most of them were smug, self-satisfied do-gooders who pranced around, performing deeds that made them feel superior. Only a fraction of them were actually useful, and those who were preached endlessly about doing what was *right* and spouted moralities all day.

Unfortunately, sorceress Suzu, his wife, had fallen in with a throng of magic users who even Rothbart thought to be unnecessarily cruel.

Rothbart knew he would be called an “evil sorcerer” by the insufferable Veneno Conclave. He wasn't interested in helping others, and he concentrated his efforts on finding ways to expand his powers for his own purposes. He wasn't opposed to using or hurting people to suit his needs, and his magic was too *sinister* for the lily-skinned conclave enchanters. But even with his questionable morals, Rothbart knew Suzu's new acquaintances would use their powers to raise a darkness that should never be touched.

The powers they played with did not bode well for the future of the continent, but that wasn't what bothered Rothbart. He didn't particularly care what happened to the world. Countries could fall; dynasties may end; chaos could reign; and Rothbart didn't really care provided it didn't affect him. Him and his daughter, that was.

And that was the central issue. Though Rothbart found it disagreeable and awkward to try and tell his daughter just how much he loved her, secretly he burst with pride over her. Suzu knew this, and she was not above using Odile to force Rothbart into doing what she wanted.

It was almost certain that someday soon Suzu would use Odile, putting their daughter in danger to force Rothbart into helping her dark friends. This Rothbart grudgingly respected as it was precisely the kind of move he make, but it was a problem.

If Rothbart and Suzu had given birth to a magic user who was half as cunning as they were, Rothbart wouldn't have worried as much. Ironically, they hadn't.

Sweet, gentle Odile would not survive if her mother forcibly tried to recruit her. He had considered dumping her on the doorstep of the Veneno Conclave's academy, but the school had ways of finding out Odile's background, and when they learned she was the offspring of a sorcerer and sorceress...

So, Rothbart found himself in search of a hero. One who would save his daughter despite her parentage. But a common hero wouldn't work. Rothbart needed someone who was as sly and cunning as himself, or the hero would not be able to disengage Odile from her mother's grasp.

Thus far, his search had not found anybody at all promising. There were brave knights and princes aplenty, but they seem to lack the patience and bravery that would be required. If Rothbart wanted to free Odile so she would not be sucked into her mother's orbit, it would have to be a long-term goal. Heroes excelled in short fights; long battles were beyond their capabilities.

Or so Rothbart had thought, until he heard of Gabrielle, the Marquis of Carabas. The female hero and her magic cat had spent the previous year waging war against the darkness that had long been brewing in Arcainia. She thrived where hundreds of soldiers and dozens of magic users had failed: she defeated the ogre squatting in Carabas.

Unfortunately, Gabrielle was permanently settled in Arcainia and would soon be wedded to Prince Steffen, the eldest prince. But her story still provoked some thought in Rothbart, for it was highly unusual. She was a female hero—a rarity—and she was a mere miller's daughter. If an Arcainian peasant girl could defeat an ogre, perhaps there were Kozlovkan peasants who could perform similar feats.

That particular thought resurfaced in Rothbart's mind as he stared at the farmer girl who had marched into his castle, announced her name was Odette, and boldly requested to become his servant in exchange for wiping out her parents' debts.

Rothbart scratched his chin as he studied her. She was young, perhaps only a year or two older than Odile. But she did not tremble as she met his gaze. On the contrary, her eyes blazed with courage, and Rothbart was almost certain he could detect an edge of ruthlessness to her.

Her sacrifice for her parents meant she was certainly one of those disgustingly loyal and faithful hero types, but if she was at all intelligent, or—dare he hoped for it—sly...

He leaned back in his chair. "You think *you* could work hard enough for me to forgive your parents' debts? They have already failed to pay me, and the interest continues to mound."

The peasant brat's voice barely shook when she replied. "Isn't it better, then, to collect a payment now? If they cannot pay you back at all, at least you will have regained some of your cost."

"Is that what they told you when they forced you to come here?" He asked.

Odette said nothing.

"They *know* you're here, don't they? They must have sent you."

She flipped her hair over her shoulders. "Of course."

Rothbart could see the lie in her eyes. Curious, he glanced at his daughter. Odile sat in the corner, her hair falling over her face, shielding herself. But he could see the glimmer of her soft eyes. She stared at the peasant girl with fascination and wonder.

Rothbart stood and walked in a circle around Odette. He could see her fear in the tenseness of her shoulders and the tightly curled fists of her hands, but her back was straight and her gaze steady.

She is a possibility. Only time can tell if she'll actually work. In the meantime, I should continue with my search. But how to keep her at the castle in case she does end up being the one? Hmm, ahhh, yes. I have just the spell.

Rothbart folded his arms across his chest and smiled cruelly. “I have no need for servants,” he said. “But, in exchange for forgiving your parents’ debts, you could serve me in other ways.”

Odette’s chin tilted up. “What did you have in mind?”

Yes, she is definitely one of those self-sacrificing heroes. She’ll probably shatter under pressure. Still, he was eager to finally use the spell he’d been tinkering with for ages. Come to think of it, he should use it on the girl that was rotting in his dungeons for trespassing as well.

Red magic encased Rothbart’s hands. “It’s quite simple, really. All you must do is serve as an experiment.”



Four years later, Rothbart stood on the shore of Swan Lake and watched Odette shout at Prince Alexsei and Prince Yakov.

The fair-haired farmer girl had outperformed Rothbart’s hopes and expectations. Within days after he had cursed her and the other girl, she had established a camp, procured weapons for defense, and stayed calm and in control in a situation when most would have faded away from sorrow.

In the months and weeks that followed, she took in every man, woman, and child Rothbart cursed and created a home and livelihood for them. Her smuggling business was quite possibly the best in the continent. Even the Verglas Assassins’ Guild used them.

She still had some of that awful, do-gooder hero in her. (She guarded his lake in a stupidly self-sacrificing move in order to keep others from wandering into his grasp.) However, she had the cunning and intelligence to try and manipulate *him*. Every chance she had she flattered and carried on over him, all while performing raids on his castle and secretly sabotaging his work. She hadn’t become the typical hero told of in ballads and songs, but a strange hybrid of ruthlessness and self-sacrifice.

Even so, Rothbart continued to give her more people and responsibilities, until he felt that she had a decent number of followers and supporters. Then he stopped cursing them, and instead turned his attention to readying a plan that would become his end and would free Odile from the blemish of her parents. (All self-righteous magic users loved a good tragedy. Even they would forgive Odile from her parents if a cursed swan maiden like Odette “*rescued her from the grasp of her evil parents!*” Ugh.)

Soon, he would have to enact his plan. And when he did, Odette would be the one to end it. She would take care of his daughter and inspire her to do what Rothbart never could. Odile would thrive with Odette. And that was all he wanted.

The thought of the coming days unsettled Rothbart. He did not look forward to his end, but there was no other way. He could not stand the light, nor would he throw his lot in with the darkness that Suzu played with. His only regret was that Odile would probably never know how much he loved her, and a small part of him regretted what he had done to Odette. He had ruined her average life. And after interacting with her for four years, Rothbart could admit he was fond

of her, and he knew that if he explained the situation to Odette, perhaps she could free him as well.

In fact, watching Odette manage her smugglers, live with her curse, and now deal with Kozlovkan royalty visiting her, Rothbart had to wonder if perhaps he could have been like her.

Don't be stupid. I have caused too much sorrow and hurt to be offered redemption now. Rothbart grunted, disgusted with his softening heart. It was too late for him. But Odile would be free, as would Odette. The feisty blonde would make certain that all of her smugglers, and Odile, were happily settled. And Rothbart would be surprised if Odette—dragging Odile and her smugglers with her—didn't go on to do more good for Kozlovka, and even for the continent.

Perhaps she'll stop Suzu.

Rothbart shrugged. "It doesn't matter. As long as Odile is happy."

He spun on his heels and quietly stalked back to his castle. He had wyverns to create.

The End