

## A Grim Reveal

### A Timeless Fairy Tales Short Story by K. M. Shea

*The following short story is a bit of a peek into the future, as it will be included in Angelique's adventures, but since the events play an important role in the future, I wanted to reveal it now. (For reference, it takes place directly after Frog Prince and Swan Lake, during the summer before Briar Rose wakes up and the events of 12 Dancing Princesses.)*

*You can expect to see a slightly changed/expanded version in Angelique's books that will release in 2019—in which case I'll take this version down from my website—but for now, I hope you enjoy this story and everything it means.*

Odette sifted through the packs dropped off at her parents' home over the past week by various members of the Black Swan Smugglers. She pulled out letters from the wanderers and sorted them into a pile. *I ought to think about making a delivery to the elves in Alabaster Forest again...they shouldn't need another shipment of the philtre yet, but it makes me nervous to have such personal—and possibly important—letters sitting around where anyone could get into them.*

The last philtre delivery she had made was with Alexsei in the late spring, and now, as mid-summer neared, the letters from the elf warriors who were forced to wander the continent were piling up.

Odette ran a hand through her blonde hair. “Maybe I should talk to Angelique and approach the Conclave about doing something for the elves...their situation grows more dire as time passes. If their curse is not broken soon...”

She hadn't seen the enchantress-in-training since Craftmage Stil and his wife Gemma had arrived, bearing grim news.

Apparently, Prince Lucien of Loire had made the realization of the century. He'd managed to link together the great darkness that had been threatening the continent for the past decade: The Chosen—an enemy more ancient than some of the countries on the continent.

The Chosen were a group of rogue magic users who had almost succeeded in taking over Verglas centuries prior, but the famed Snow Queen had beat them back, defeating most of their forces.

Prince Severin—the commanding general of Loire's forces and the main organizer of the many-country alliance formed to combat the previously un-heard of wave of calamity that plagued the continent—was trying to keep the information of the ancient enemy a secret, as the knowledge was the first advantage grasped in years. The only reason Odette was aware of it was because of her relationship with Alexsei—she had been at the palace when Craftmage Stil and Gemma explained the situation.

Odette sighed and shook her head, returning her attention to the letters. “I need to focus on this. My clients still deserve my full attention, and there's nothing I can do to combat The Chosen,” she scolded herself.

“Actually, there is something.”

Odette whirled around, sliding a dagger into her palm before she realized who stood in the doorway of her parents' humble home. Smiling, Odette slipped the dagger back into place and stood. “Lady Enchantress Angelique!”

The enchantress smiled wanly. The dark circles under her eyes were even more pronounced than when Odette had last seen her. “Swan Queen. You continue to help your clients?” she pointed past Odette to the pile of letters.

“Yes.” Odette folded her arms across her chest. “It’s not good to abandon our clients, or our reputation will suffer.”

Angelique arched an eyebrow. “It has nothing to do with your inability to abandon those in need of your help?”

Odette awkwardly cleared her throat. “You said there is something I can do?”

“Ahhh, yes. You recall the news Stil and Gemma shared when they arrived in Kozlovka?”

Odette nodded. “They explained all about The Chosen and the theory that they are behind the darkness that now threatens the continent.”

“Yes, well, according to historic documents from Verglas, the Chosen originally attacked their country in an effort to seize a magical artifact that was buried in their northern mountain range.” Angelique shifted, as if she wanted to lean against the doorframe, but she kept her hands beautifully enfolded before her.

Odette beckoned for the enchantress to sit on a well-worn but solid chair pulled up around her family’s rickety table. “An artifact?”

Angelique seated herself in one of the chairs, closing her eyes and slumping for a moment, then collecting herself up with a crisp smile. “Yes, a large mirror.”

“What became of it?” Odette leaned back in her chair so it balanced on the back two legs.

“The Snow Queen collapsed an avalanche over it to prevent anyone from reaching it, and with her residual magic, kept all evil things that possess magic out of Verglas. It has long been assumed that it is safe and out of reach.” Angelique pressed her lips together. “But with the renewed threat of The Chosen, Prince Severin—and I—think we had best check on the mirror given Chosen’s history with it.”

Odette nodded. “Understandable. If the Chosen have been as conniving as it seems, you can bet they will soon go after the mirror again, just like they did the first time.”

“Indeed. We’re mounting a party in Ostfold of Verglas. I’ll be going on the expedition, along with a number of weather mages, other magic users, and Verglas soldiers. Queen Linnea is organizing the bulk of it but needs the mages as the mountains are impassable without magic. The snow on the mountains never thaws, and the few paths that used to venture there have long been lost to avalanches, rockslides, and cave-ins.”

“So you’re saying it’s going to take you a while to carve out a path to this mirror.”

“Yes.”

Odette pulled on a lock of her hair. *I can guess where this is going.* “You know where the mirror is located, then?”

“Approximately. King Steinar of Verglas notes its location in his journal, but he never gave the specific mountain. The Snow Queen dropped a mountain on top of it, but unfortunately, there are *three* mountains northwest of Fresler’s Helm that have experienced such severe avalanche damage, we can’t tell which one it is.” Angelique paused. “I’d like you to take some of your crew and scout the area ahead of us with fly-overs. As swans, you could check the area before we even enter the mountain range.”

*Yep, no surprise here...but it doesn’t matter. I owe Angelique. Even though Rothbart broke our curse, she modified it first and has done a lot for Odile.* Odette kept her face relaxed and expressionless. “If the Snow Queen buried the mirror in snow, do you really think we’ll be able to see it from the sky?”

“No, but *if* someone has been poking around the area, I believe you would be able to tell.” The Lady Enchantress briefly rubbed her forehead. “If you find nothing, it would be safe to

assume it is still buried, and our party can expect to recover it. It's a reconnaissance mission only; you wouldn't even land."

Odette nodded slowly, already mentally picking out whom to bring. *Even if it's just a fly-over, I should bring a good-sized crew. We'll need strong flyers though, as I bet the wind gets nasty in the mountains.*

"Normally I wouldn't ask such a thing of you, but with the speed at which you can fly over the mountains compared to the slow progress our group will be forced to make, any information you can bring us would be greatly appreciated," Angelique said.

"I understand," Odette said. "We'll do it."

Angelique blinked. "Really?"

Odette nodded. "The Black Swan Smugglers owe you for everything you have done. I do have a few concerns, though. We're swans, not tundra geese. Even with the power of our vigor spell keeping us going, we may not be able to reach the mirror if the mountains are too cold."

"The mountain range is the warmest it's going to get right now as it is summer—though you will still have to battle snow and wind. But we've already thought of this." Angelique set a small pouch on the table and loosened the tie that held it shut before pouring its contents out on the table.

Rubies the size of Odette's thumbnail that were cut to resemble flames scattered across the table surface.

"These are heat charms made by craftmages." Angelique scooped one up and held it so the sunlight that peeked into the home made it glitter. "A few of the mages worked together to create a sort of pliable ribbon that will stretch to accompany your human-throat and shrink when you are a swan. No matter which shape you take, these charms attached to the ribbon will keep you warm. Though if you encounter extreme weather, please, by all means, turn back."

Odette nodded. "I assume you wish for my crew and me to report in at Ostfold?"

Angelique nodded. "The rest of the party is still preparing. I came to ask you because I know you, and because Pegasus is the fastest method of transportation since my master..." she sighed so quietly and quickly Odette barely noticed it. "Anyway. By the time you and your crew arrive in Ostfold, I hope we are ready to move out and will begin our journey to the base of Fresler's Helm—where we will remain until you return. Once you report in, you are free to return to Kozlovka."

Odette highly doubted that. It was unlikely her people would be able to uncover anything helpful in one trip. They would likely have to go back and forth between the search party and the supposed location where the mirror was several times before they were able to narrow down the area. She nibbled on her lip as she thought of Alexsei. *Hopefully it won't take long...I don't want to be away from...home.*

Knowing she wasn't fooling herself, Odette stood and rolled her shoulders back. "Then we will fly in to Ostfold as instructed. If you'll excuse my rudeness, I would like to head out. Misha is on his way to the palace, and I might be able to catch him before he arrives."

Angelique also stood and joined Odette in walking to the door. "You are prepared to leave so soon?"

"I have to give my people a bit of notice—they have families," Odette said. "But you did say you wanted this to be done as swiftly as possible, and we Black Swan Smugglers aim to please."

A genuine smile warmed Angelique's face, bringing brightness back to her eyes. "Thank you, Odette. Any information you and your crew can give us will be invaluable."

Odette squinted in the sunlight as they exited the house. She shielded her eyes with her hand and spotted Pegasus—Angelique’s horse-shaped and star-spattered mount—standing in the shade of a tree.

“We will not let you down,” Odette promised.

“Hopefully you won’t be able to see anything at all, and the mirror remains undisturbed. But, all the same, we appreciate your willingness to be a forerunner,” Angelique said. “I’ll see you in Ostfold?”

Odette bowed slightly. “In Ostfold. Safe journey to you, Angelique.”

“To you as well, Odette.” The enchantress smiled before she strode off toward her horse.

Odette turned her attention and internally reached for the spell that transformed her into a swan, feeling it unfold within her. As light and dust swirled around her and magic made her body tingle, Odette clenched her eyes shut.

*For the sake of the Continent, I hope Angelique is right. I hope the mirror lies undisturbed in its snowy prison.*

\*\*\*

The mountains of Verglas were colder than Odette expected. *It’s more frigid than a sorcerer’s heart out here!* She wanted to honk, but sadly the particular breed of swan into which she transformed was incapable of more than hisses and grumbles.

The heat charms Angelique had supplied were a help—it kept her body temperature up—but the wind still cut through Odette’s downy feathers like a sword made of ice.

Odette craned her long neck, checking on the eight other Black Swan Smugglers she had chosen for the mission.

Both Misha and Nadia—who brought up the rear—wiggled slightly in their flight.

*Good. That means no one has fallen behind. Now...the place where the mirror is buried should be somewhere around here.*

She shifted her flight pattern slightly and felt the weight of the slippers that were secured to her back. (Technically she wouldn’t need them, as Angelique had specifically instructed them not to land, but Odette had been forced to forgo footwear on many occasions when she had been cursed by Rothbart and now tended to be paranoid.)

*Hopefully it’s not too much farther—ahh, there they are.* The clouds cleared, letting Odette view three mountains that had been worn down by weather, rockslides, and avalanches. One was clearly the worst. It was skinnier, and a side had collapsed in, so there was a wider valley than usual between it and the next mountain.

*I bet it’s that one. If the Snow Queen’s magic is still strong enough to guard the borders, she must have been strong enough to topple part of a mountain.*

Odette banked, leading her crew closer. They’d have to check out the other mountains as well, but for this trip, anyway, she was going to make this mountain the priority.

Slowly they changed altitude, dropping down through the air so they only skimmed above the ground. This much closer, Odette could see that the bottom of the valley was actually buried deep in ice and rubble. There wasn’t a path—or even a channel where water ran off—there were just layers of snow and rock.

*Angelique wasn’t joking. It might take them weeks to work through this!*

Misha abruptly joined her at the front of their V flying formation. When he had Odette’s attention, he circled back.

Odette followed, watching him as he very clearly scanned the ground before she joined him, her eyes tracing over the snow below.

He abruptly pulled back, flapping his wings furiously as he wheeled in a tight circle.

It took a moment for Odette's eyes to adjust before she realized there was a small patch of black that wasn't a shadow thrown by a rock, but a *hole*.

*That's too big to be a rabbit hole or a wolf den...*

Odette let herself coast, slowly losing altitude before carefully landing on the snow—her wings unfolded so she could take off if the footing was poor and the snow collapsed in.

She scurried around the hole a bit—noting how it must have once been bigger, but snow poured in one side.

*I better check this out as a human.*

She initiated the change, shivering slightly when snowflakes, bits of ice, and pebbles began to float around her as light erupted at her feet. Her wings pulled back, bells clanged, and the snow and light enveloped her as her body started to stretch out into her human form.

“Cold!” Odette declared, hopping from one foot to the other before she scooped up her slippers and shoved them on her feet. The heat charm was secured at her neck, but as she wore only trousers and a silk shirt, the wind still cut through her.

“I'm heading in!” she shouted into the wind.

Misha and Nadia were already changing, and all but two of the other Black Swan Smugglers were in the process of landing. (The remaining two would keep flying overhead, just in case things went poorly.)

Odette carefully crept down the hole, pausing to blink as her eyes adjusted to the dimness. The tunnel was only half opened, and much of it was lined with ice.

“Careful,” Odette called back to Misha and Nadia when they joined her. “It's practically an ice slick in here.”

She edged forward, straightening up and pausing when the tunnel opened into a high but narrow chamber.

It was empty—or mostly. At the far end of the room was a pick-axe. The pointed end was snapped off, as though something had sheered it. Beyond that, nothing.

The floor was covered in snow. Odette crouched down and dusted it away, easily shaking off the cold with the heat charm now that she was out of the wind. She was surprised to find the snow was only about a thumb's-thickness deep before it turned into ice. She brushed away more of the snow, her eyebrows raising when she realized boot tracks were pressed into the frozen surface.

The rest of the Black Swan Smugglers crowded the entrance as Odette stood.

“I don't see anything that could trigger a trap,” Misha said.

Odette inhaled deeply and rolled her shoulders back. “Good. Nadia, you should go in first. There's a layer of ice beneath the snow that has some tracks. See what you can tell.”

Nodding, Nadia stepped away from the tunnel. She crouched down and started brushing snow away from the ice, her eyes scanning the ground.

“If we stick to the walls, I think we can help her,” Misha said. “Shall we push all the snow towards the eastern wall?”

Feofan—the axe-wielder who had gone after the first wyvern Rothbart had created with Odette, Nadia, Kira, and Alexsei—scratched his head. “Which wall is east?”

Misha rolled his eyes. “The right one.”

Kira flexed her arms. “Let's do it.”

Moving carefully so they didn't crush the tracks, the Black Swan Smugglers started sweeping the snow across the room with their bare hands.

Feofan whistled when he reached the broken pick-axe. “Unless this was poorly made, something bad went down here. Pick-axe heads don’t break like this naturally.”

“It looks like they carved the room out,” Misha said as he eyed the chamber. “These walls are clearly pox-marked with pick points.”

“Saves us a lot of trouble,” Kira said as she brushed snow away. When it coated her hand, she blew on it, sending snowflakes spiraling through the air. “I’m thinking you need to convince Alexsei to hire a craftmage, Odette,” she laughed. “These heat charms are amazing.”

“The Veneno Conclave doesn’t often allow mages to have permanent posts in countries, unless it’s for protection,” Odette said.

“So they can’t be bribed or accused of favoring a specific country?” a smuggler near the front of the room asked.

“Most likely,” Misha acknowledged.

“Swan Queen,” Nadia called.

Odette stood and brushed snow off her hands. “Did you find something?” She crept across the room, hugging the wall. Her wretched slippers skid out from under her, but she regained her balance and joined Nadia at the back of the room.

Nadia rubbed the back of her neck. “There was a large party here, but it was years ago.”

“Can you guess when it was?” Odette asked. “In the more than a decade ago, or something more recent?”

Nadia shook her head. “A weather mage or ice mage would be able to tell you based on the ice itself. I can only guess.”

“What can you tell about the party?” Odette asked.

“It was a mixed group: several large men—they were possibly locals based on the shape of their boots, someone either of noble birth or who had a lot of money based on the grips of their boots, and several weather mages.”

“How do you know about the mages?”

“The ice formed strangely around their feet. I suspect they were the ones who helped open up this chamber. It clearly was caved in at some point,” Nadia said.

“Did they clear it for shelter, then?” Odette asked.

Nadia shook her head. “No.” She crouched down and pointed to a long indentation that cracked deeper than the layer of ice the Black Swan Smugglers were tip-toeing around on. “You can see at the back of this crack that it shows signs of the snow and ice melting and pooling. One of the mages melted it, which is how they got it out of the ice.”

“It?” Odette asked.

“The mirror,” Nadia said. “It was here.”

Odette wanted to uncurl her swan wings, but she settled for rolling her shoulders instead. “The mirror—the artifact the Chosen chased after.”

“The chances of finding a different mirror out here, buried under rock and snow, seem slim,” Nadia said bluntly.

Odette nodded, but her mind was spitting out thoughts so quickly she couldn’t keep track. *It’s real, The Chosen are real. They weren’t a story made up by adults to entertain children. The evil they championed is real. I know Angelique said they were, but to see the proof with my own eyes...*

“Odette?” Nadia asked.

Odette shook her head. “Sorry. I was just thinking...how *strange* this is.”

Nadia nodded slowly. “But I’m afraid with this, we have uncovered the worst possible information we could deliver.”

Odette opened her mouth to ask, but the realization hit her like a ton of bricks. “The mirror is gone.” She turned to gaze at the long indentation where the artifact had once rested. Her lips turned numb with fear. “It’s gone...and no one *knew*. Which must mean...”

“The Chosen recovered it,” Nadia said.

The words seemed to fill the chamber with a coldness a thousand times more freezing than the wind that raged outside.

“But *how*? No one with evil magic can enter Verglas!” Odette reached for her daggers on her belt—which weren’t there—and flinched.

“Those who collected the mirror might not have known what they were doing. They could have been manipulated, or paid,” Nadia said.

A shiver traveled up Odette’s spine. “And they walked into the mountains—the Snow Queen’s *territory*—and picked up an ancient and evil artifact without anyone knowing?”

“Nadia is right: it reeks of the Chosen. Who else would have known the mirror was more than a nursery tale—let alone where to find it?” Misha asked, entering the conversation with his brows pinched in concern.

Odette sighed as if the weight of the world pressed against her. “We had better return—fast. Angelique needs to be warned—*everyone* must be warned.”

“What do you mean?” Feofan asked as he and the rest of the smugglers shifted their attention to her.

Odette placed her hands on her hips as she faced her people. “The countries are preparing for war,” she said. “What they are not preparing for is another *magic* war—the likes of which has not been seen for centuries.”

*To be continued in Angelique’s story, coming 2019*