

## The Robber Maiden

A Snow Queen Short story by K. M. Shea

Phile—Robber Maiden of Baris and daughter of Leonia, the famed leader of the Dishonorable Knaves—was splayed across a rafter like it was a feather-stuffed mattress. She tossed Foedus—her ugly dagger—in the air and caught it by hilt. She lazily spun it around a finger, then used it to scratch her side.

She yawned and flipped over onto her stomach so she could watch Chosen officers swarm beneath her like little ants. *Nothing has changed. I first heard the rumors of a royal ice magic user in the south and tracked the whispers north. But since then... nothing.*

She had been, for the most part, following the trail left behind by the First Regiment—the most well-trained and well-disciplined regiment of the Chosen army. The majority of the regiment's forces were stationed in Ostfold—where she was kicking up her heels for the moment as she waited for a whisper, for a *breath* of information about the famed exiled Verglas Princess.

But there was nothing.

*Maybe she doesn't exist after all. Perhaps they were only fanciful rumors, and she was killed as a child.* The thought made her grimace. Phile never understood what about magic made so many people act toady and stupid.

Rakel blinked when a bright light flickered on the wall. Frowning, she followed the light to a garbed officer—Colonel Kavon. She recognized him as he had arrived in Ostfold the day before with a supply train and several of his squads. They were due to leave in a few hours and head south again.

*What is he holding that is casting a reflective light? Jewels? I bet at the very least, it is something expensive.*

Her interest piqued, Phile peeled herself off her beam and ghosted across the rafters—watching warily that she did not catch any attention.

No one looked up, so she followed the perimeter of the room, cursing under her breath when Colonel Kavon—a handsome man who wore an unfortunately dark-looking smirk that considerably dampened his charm—left the hall.

“King's toes,” she muttered. She abandoned the rafters and was forced to climb up the wall—built with unfortunately slick rock bricks that were difficult to get a toe or finger-hold on. She heaved herself into a ventilation slit that opened into the outside and huffed at the disagreeably cold temperature. “Verglas winters—why does anyone *live* here? A body is not meant to survive these extreme conditions!” She picked her way across the slippery roof and jumped from one building to the next, pausing long enough to cast a glance at some of the palace ruins.

The Chosen Army had not been kind when it took the Verglas palace. Parts of it had been burned down, and some of the outer walls were ripped to shreds.

Phile tracked her quarry across the palace. Sometimes, she had to shimmy down the walls and press her face against glass windows to see where he was going, and she almost lost him when he took the long route around the library.

She was surprised when he left the palace and entered a snowed-over flower garden. She crouched on the edge of the roof like a gargoyle—her teeth chattering—as she watched him study whatever was in his hands.

When the colonel turned to look north, Phile picked her way down the wall and drew as close to him as she dared, crouching behind a shrub. She glared at him as she pulled her jacket tighter, trying to keep warm in the frigid wind.

Colonel Kavon—oblivious to her presence—studied the impassable mountain range that cradled northern Verglas. “Where are you?” he murmured. His smirk turned into a grimacing smile as Phile stared at him in awe.

*What sort of idiot comes outside in this weather to talk to himself?*

Irritated, she popped out from behind her snow-covered bush and slithered into an evergreen tree, sweating with the effort it took to avoid shaking the tree as she crawled between its branches.

The new position gave her a better view, allowing her to see that Colonel Kavon held what looked like a shard of a mirror in his hands. As he caressed the surface, Phile could almost feel something *evil* radiating from the shard.

She shivered.

It wasn't the first mirror shard she had seen. Tenebris Malus—leader of the Chosen—and another one of his colonels possessed mirror shards as well. *But why?*

Colonel Kavon slipped the shard in a pocket and sauntered back to the palace. He brushed against Phile's tree and, without thinking, she picked his pocket. Her swift fingers eased into his pocket as the needle-like branches brushed his side.

Kavon looked straight into the tree and brushed his sides with a frown.

Phile held her breath. *Had he felt it?*

He walked away, whistling a tune and stamping his feet when he left the garden for an open-air corridor.

Phile watched him leave, exhaling with relief when he fell out of sight and hearing range. “That was risky. Mother would have paddled me for fumbling on such an oblivious target.” She pinched the mirror shard between two fingers and frowned at it. It was about as big as her thumb and dangerously sharp—though the surface appeared to be too warped to properly show a reflection.

It was pretty disappointing to look at, considering the people of power that all seemed to possess one.

“Perhaps it helps them communicate?” Phile left her tree and climbed up the side of the palace, flipping onto the ceiling just in time to avoid a set of patrolling soldiers. Judging by the amount of medals and trim sewn to their uniforms, they were probably magic users. She was about to roll to her feet and pick her way back across the ruined palace, when the soldiers spoke.

“Good afternoon, Healer Sunnira.”

“Good afternoon. You need to report in to your patrol leader as swiftly as possible.”

Phile peeked over the edge of the ceiling so she hung upside down and watched with interest as a pretty woman handed the magic users a scroll.

“Is something wrong, Healer Sunnira?” one of the men asked.

“Of a sort. We've received orders from Colonel Graydim—he's pulling out a few squads of soldiers and several officers. Your rotation is changing to cover for the loss.”

“He needs more troops? Why? I thought there were only a few mountain villages left.”

“There are. Apparently one of those villages was the supply hub for the exiled Princess Raketel,” the woman said.

Phile almost lost her hold of the roof in her glee.

“She's *real*?” A soldier marveled.

“Frighteningly so. She’s already beaten back our forces and retaken two villages. Report in to your patrol leader for more details.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Phile pulled herself back onto the roof just before the woman turned in her direction. She grinned from ear to ear as she felt her pocket for the mirror shard. *So she exists, does she? Wonderful! Perhaps now Verglas will be able to fight back. Though I imagine the state of the country will make her suspicious of outside help. What great luck it is, then, that I have a token to offer her,* she thought, patting the mirror shard she had just swiped. She hopped, skipped, and leaped her way across the palace, intending to sniff out a copy of the orders. She needed to find out where the mythical royal was making her stand. *Princess, I so look forward to meeting you.*

The End