

Scouting

A Snow Queen Short Story by K. M. Shea

This short story takes place after the events of Heart of Ice, and before Snow Queen 2. It was a fun little bonding trip I imagined that—like some of the other shorts—didn't fit well in either of the books, so it became a standalone short story. I hope you enjoy it!

Rakel mindlessly stared at the book that was open on her lap—a tattered fencing manual. It was one of several books she had selected as research material in her quest to learn more about edged weapons. (It still bothered her that her ice replicas were beautiful but imperfect.) She had chosen this particular copy because the childish scrawl in the book showed it had once belonged to her father.

She held in a sigh and shut the book. *What am I doing? Steinar won't leave his room and we haven't found detailed information about the mirror, yet I'm hidden away in the library, reading.* “I should be doing something,” she murmured.

“Great! I'm glad to hear you're aware of that—because I didn't know how I was going to nicely tell you all this reading is making your face pinched.” Phile popped into Rakel's peripheral vision.

Rakel blinked. “Phile.”

The Robber Maiden bowed. “At your service!”

“How did you get in here? Knut said he would announce anyone who entered.”

“Yes, but Knut is posted outside the door. I came in through a window.”

“Of course. Did you need something?”

Phile plopped down in an armchair. “Not really, I just dropped by to collect you for an airing out. You need some sunshine.” Phile's crimson-red jacket and white linen pants clashed horribly with the green velvet of the armchair.

“I thought that since arriving in Ostfold, your greatest undertaking has been to avoid the frigid outdoors.” Rakel said.

“That was before I knew we were going to be aimlessly kicking up our heels for so long. It's been a week and a half, and Colonel Dimwit and his regiment haven't budged an inch.” Phile scowled and played with her glossy, dark-colored hair that was collected in its usual ponytail.

“General Halvor says it is a boon to us.” Rakel put the book aside. “He is using this time to reorganize our troops, and it gives the Verglas magic users time to practice—an opportunity they have previously not had.”

“Yeah, but you can bet the Chosen are up to something sneaky,” Phile argued. “Farrin Graydim is brilliant. He wouldn't pout in his camp for this long just because we kicked him out of Ostfold. He's waiting for something.”

“Or someone,” Rakel said, meeting her friend's gaze. “Tenebris Malus.”

Phile grimaced. “Probably.” She tapped her fingers on the armrest of her chair. “Why don't we confirm it?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Phile leaned forward, an eager smile spreading across her lips. “We could go scout with Snorri—like we did for Glowma—and find out for ourselves what the wait is for.”

“We scouted in Glowma because it was necessary for me to see the city. I have no such need to see the Chosen camp.”

“I don’t believe it,” Phile declared. “This inactivity is bothering you as much as it bothers me. You can’t fool me, Little Wolf. I know the mirror troubles you. Wouldn’t you like to see if we can find more information?”

Rakel pressed her lips together, aware that Phile was manipulating her. *But she has a point. If we could unveil more information about the mirror...if we could find it, we could destroy it!*

“For the Glowma scouting trip we went with Oskar and General Halvor. Neither have the time to spare to journey with us as Farrin’s camp is more than a day’s ride away,” Rakel said.

Phile’s grin turned sly. “I think Glowma proved that you, Snorri, and I are all that is needed.”

“General Halvor would never agree to it.”

“What if Oskar agreed to it?” Phile wheedled.

“And what of the General?”

“We could forget to tell him.”

“You don’t have to.” Oskar strolled out from behind a bookshelf. “He’s out on practice maneuvers with the troops and won’t be expected to return until this evening.”

Knut hovered at the attendant’s shoulder. “Oskar is here to speak to you, Princess.”

Rakel smiled wryly. “Thank you, Knut.”

The soldier saluted and returned to his post.

“You can’t scout *in* the camp. It’s too dangerous and unnecessarily risky,” Oskar said. “But I see no reason why you couldn’t view the camp—provided Snorri agrees to accompany you *and* you refrain from using your magic, Princess. If you use any of your powers you will alert Chosen magic users to your presence.”

Phile sprang out of her chair. “Wonderful! I’ll get some provisions and packs for us!” She was out of the library before anyone could stop her.

Rakel, however, didn’t trust Oskar’s quick approval. “Why do you so easily agree?”

Oskar smiled knowingly. “You’ve been quiet and thoughtful for several days. An adventure with Phile will brighten your spirits.”

“General Halvor would say it is too perilous.”

“It’s a calculated risk,” Oskar admitted. “You are capable of taking care of yourself, but your companions will add another layer of protection—particularly Snorri now that he has come clean about his magic.”

“What will you tell General Halvor?”

“That you and Phile went on a camping trip. He’ll know what you’re really doing, but it will keep his rage level to simmering instead of eruptive.”

A fond smile curled Rakel’s lips. “Thank you, Oskar.”

Oskar bowed. “It is my pleasure, Princess.”



Rakel stared at a squirrel sitting in a tree with suspicion.

“Relax, Little Wolf. That’s not Farrin’s shape shifter,” Phile said. She rode her horse—which she had stolen weeks ago from a Chosen soldier—and which obediently walked shoulder to shoulder with the two ponies that pulled the small sleigh Snorri and Rakel sat in.

“How do you know?” Rakel asked.

“Because she doesn’t have a squirrel form.”

The squirrel chattered and ate a nut.

Is it...listening to us? “You can’t know that.”

“Yes, I can. We’ve seen a fox, snow bear, and a wolf. She hasn’t changed into anything that isn’t a carnivore.” Phile ticked off the shapes on her fingers.

“Maybe those are only shapes she chooses to take in battle. I imagine she has a separate set she uses for scouting,” Rakel said.

Snorri mumbled.

“What was that, most-majestic-and-virile-of-scouts?” Phile asked.

Snorri’s expression remained flat. “The Princess is correct.”

Rakel pulled her eyes away from the squirrel long enough to give Phile her version of a triumphant smile—the barely discernible curling of her lips.

Phile ignored her. “Oh my, Snorri! I like it when you take charge!” She winked, then her expression sobered. “Perhaps you are right, Little Wolf. Maybe the Chosen shape shifter can turn into a tree rat. But I promise that squirrel isn’t a magic user. How would she know to be in this exact area? Why would she appear out in the open instead of hiding in the trees when there is a chance we might want squirrel stew for our dinner?”

Snorri nodded in agreement.

Not at all reassured, Rakel stared at the squirrel until they moved around a curve in the hill.

Phile raised her nose to the air and sniffed. “We’re almost there, aren’t we? I can smell their campfires.”

“We’re downwind of them,” Snorri said. There’s a cluster of tall hills we will remain in.” His voice was quiet but firm.

“I know, I know. We can’t go dragging Rakel into the enemy camp. It’s a good thing I brought a spyglass.” Phile patted a saddlebag.

“You own a spyglass?” Rakel asked, unable to recall seeing the Robber Maiden with such a costly tool before.

“No—I *borrowed* it from the Royal Library.”

Rakel scowled. “From the library? That means it is a national treasure. You cannot borrow national treasures to use for scouting missions.”

“Why not? It’s a spyglass, it was made to be used. If you’re not gonna use it, why bother having it?” Phile asked.

Rakel drew up her shoulders—fully intending to growl at the Robber Maiden—when Snorri offhandedly offered, “There’s the camp.”

The trees partially cleared, giving Rakel and her companions a branch covered view of the Chosen camp. It was a sprawling ocean of tents and plumes of smoke set on packed snow. It glittered with weapons, armor, and leather horse tack, and buzzed with activities and noises. It was much larger than she expected.

However, it was also clear that Farrin had carefully selected the location. Snorri’s “hills” were more similar to cliffs, and to avoid the possibility of an avalanche—or of Rakel dropping an avalanche on them—the camp was set a fair distance away from them so the snow couldn’t wipe it out, but it was still close enough to guard their backs. (After all, no enemy—magical or mundane—could drop from sheer cliffs and survive.)

Snorri mumbled.

Phile slid off her horse. “Yes, you are right. We should set up our base here.”

Snorri unhitched the sleigh ponies and led them away.

“You understood him?” Rakel asked.

“Of course not. I have no idea what he said; it just seemed like the most likely subject for him to speak of.”

Rakel chuckled and helped the Robber Maiden remove saddlebags from her horse.



The following day, Phile held the nationally treasured spyglass to her eye and squinted. “Yep, I’m certain that big black tent they’re pitching must be for Tenebris.”

Rakel, crouched behind a drift, stirred snow with a fingertip. “It could be for Farrin.”

Phile adjusted the spyglass. “Nah, he doesn’t give a King’s toe about that sort of thing. His quarters are always tidy but empty.”

“How can you know this for certain? You’ve only been in his quarters once, in Glowma.”

“Riiight. Just once,” Phile said.

“You’ve gotten *that close* in your scouting trips?” Rakel’s voice hitched with shock.

“Snorri did it too!” Phile removed her eye from the spyglass long enough to point an accusing finger at her fellow scout.

“I have magic,” Snorri said. He ghosted forward through the undergrowth that sheltered him, as if grew around him. He raised the spyglass to his eye—drawing a squawk from Phile when she realized he had swiped it from her.

Rakel tried to restore order to her wild snow-white hair, weaving it into a braid as she watched the scouts. “I assume you two will leave me here tonight, and try to venture into the camp then?”

Phile eased her way through the undergrowth so she could stand shoulder to shoulder with Snorri and reach for the spyglass—which he held out of her reach. “What tipped you off?”

“The presence of a black tent is hardly solid evidence that Farrin is indeed expecting Tenebris Malus to arrive soon.”

“It’s a *big* black tent. Snorri, you have to share. *I’m* the one who smuggled the spyglass out here.”

Snorri ignored her and popped out of the undergrowth so he was standing on the edge of the hill’s cliff-like drop off.

Rakel yanked on her hair—tightening the braid—and tied it off. “Perhaps it is unwise to stand so close to the edge of the cliff.”

“We’re too far away. They won’t see us,” Phile said—though she still lurked in the underbrush.

“I was not thinking of the Chosen, but the snow. It’s a heavy fall this year, and I can see evidence of avalanches and landslides carving down the cliff-side. There’s piles of snow and rock at the base.”

“Good call. You should listen to her, Snorri, and give me back the spyglass.”

Snorri collapsed the spyglass and turned around—presumably to answer Phile—when the snow crunched oddly under his feet.

“Snorri!” Rakel shouted.

The snow and rock beneath his feet gave out beneath him, and careened down the cliff, spattering snow and cracking rock. Snorri, unable to regain his balance fast enough to move, fell with it.

He hit the side of the cliff with a painful crack and scabbled one-handedly for a handhold. Rock, dirt, and snow kept scraping away, and Snorri almost tumbled from reach.

Phile dove out of the underbrush and threw herself to her belly, grabbing Snorri's groping hand. Her face twisted in a grimace, and she sweat with exertion. Snorri wedged his feet into the crag, but the snow and ground crackled ominously beneath Phile.

Rakel didn't hesitate. She reached out with her magic and solidified the snow—stabilizing Phile's position—then built a small ice platform beneath Snorri.

"Drop him," Rakel said.

Snorri let go, exhaling deeply when the ice beneath him held.

Rakel built ice stairs for him to climb, and Phile rolled away from the edge.

"It's been fun, but I guess that is our cue to leave, eh? Oskar did say not to use your magic or they would sense you." Phile ran for the saddlebags and began throwing their few supplies into them, then buckled them haphazardly to her horse.

"There was no other choice." Rakel extended her hand to Snorri to help him clear the last step.

Instead of grasping her hand, he set the spyglass in it. Rakel gaped at it. "You didn't *drop* it?"

Snorri shook his head and dusted snow and grit from his clothes. "It is a national treasure."

That must be why he didn't grab the cliff securely. He wouldn't let it go. Rakel both admired his actions, and wanted to shake him. "Your life is more important than an object, Snorri."

"Phile and you, Princess, caught me," Snorri said. He bowed to Rakel then hurried to the ponies, throwing their harnesses on them as Phile dragged the lightweight sleigh out from its shelter among scraggily bushes.

Rakel peered over the side of the cliff and shattered the ice platform and stairs, making broken ice fall like raindrops.

Phile helped Snorri tack the second pony. "Let's go, Snow Queen. We've got to blaze a trail before that beau of yours figures out where we are."

"Even Farrin Graydim will take a time to climb this hill. The cliffs will prevent him from using his magic to come straight up," Snorri said.

"Normally I would take a moment to mark this momentous occasion—you spoke *two full sentences*, Snorri, well done! However, as we are in what Handsome Halvor would call a necessary retreat, I will save the celebration for later. Let's go, go, go! Wipe the camp clean, Little Wolf!"

"But my magic—"

"They already know you're here after saving us. Go!"

Phile threw herself on her horse—which pranced and shied when Rakel dragged drifts down from the crest of the hill and buried all evidence of their camp under a knee-high blanket of snow.

She slipped into the carriage, and Snorri cracked the reins, making the ponies set off at a brisk trot.

"Not bad at all. We might not have solid evidence of Tenebris's impending arrival, but at least we'll escape with our hides intact. With luck, we won't even have to tell Handsome Halvor and Oggle-worthy Oskar why we packed up camp so quickly and came back home."

The horse and ponies huffed as they glided across the snow crust.

“You will, however, have to tell them you brought a priceless national treasure on a scouting trip,” Rakel said.

Phile ducked a branch. “Thank you for ruining the mood, Little Wolf. What’s so special about that spyglass anyway?”

“History,” Snorri said.

“History? I suppose I can respect that.”

Rakel eyed her. “That is surprisingly decent of you.”

Phile grinned. “Of course. One day, we’ll be a part of history too, Little Wolf.”

Rakel shook her head. “I find it unlikely any will care that Verglas—an isolated snow country—kept its independence against the Chosen.”

“You never know, Little Wolf,” Phile said with a sly grin. “Worlds can be changed by the smallest things.”

The trees cleared and they were forced to stop talking as Phile and Snorri urged their equines to go faster.



Farrin Graydim looked up from the report he was reading in his tent. ...*Rakel?* There, he felt it again. The minty, cool caress of her unmistakable magic. He arose from his desk and left his tent, following the beckoning of her magic, until he was at the edge of camp and staring at the harsh, unforgiving gray and white of the snow covered cliff-like hills that guarded his regiment’s flank.

He tapped his speed magic, and ran across the open field, stopping at the base of the hill. There was freshly fallen snow and rock, but the pull of Rakel’s magic came from higher up.

He contemplated her presence and the possibilities it presented. *Based on the hurried flavor to it, I don’t believe they are attacking.* He considered trekking around to the sloping side of the hill. *Unnecessary* he decided when he felt her magic fade as she fled. *She is retreating.*

“Sir?” Bunny—out on patrol—popped out of a bush in her red fox body. “You must have felt her as well. Your orders?”

Farrin stood on a knife’s edge of indecision. He should have her tracked, and captured if possible. But Tenebris was days away from arriving, and Farrin knew without a shadow of a doubt that when he came, what little peace and joy Rakel possessed would be snatched from her.

“Investigate the hill,” Farrin said. “They are already gone—her magic faded too quickly for them to be here, still—but see if you can uncover who was with Her Highness, and what they were after.”

“You don’t want me to track them?”

Farrin hesitated. “No.”

“Yessir!” Bunny, untroubled by the lameness of his orders, bounded away, her red tail flashing against the white snow.

Farrin started the walk back to camp. It took a great deal of effort to suffocate his nagging desire to chase after Rakel, just so he could see her again.

Tenebris will soon arrive, Farrin grimly reminded himself. *I must remain focused.* Still, for the greater part of the day, snow-white hair and glacier-blue eyes lingered in his thoughts.