

Swan Lake



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Once upon a time there was a beautiful kingdom in a distant land. The center of this kingdom was a vast and tranquil lake, its waters still as the surface of a looking glass, and out of its midst rose a high rock upon which sat a grand palace. This was the home of the King and Queen and their beloved daughter, the Princess Odette.

Odette spent many happy years in that place, watching the graceful swans alighting upon the waters of the lake below and moving across its surface with hardly a ripple, so delicate were they. Though she loved her home and her parents so, she often dreamt of being a swan; free to dance upon the lake and then take to the sky when the urge to roam was upon her.

Her parents, also, sensed her need to see and learn more than could be gotten in the castle overlooking Swan Lake, and they decided she was old enough now to have a prince and to see more of the world. They summoned royalty from far away lands in hopes their daughter might find, in them, a love of her own. The choice was always Odette's for, so fair was she, that not a man in the world would need think twice about taking her hand in marriage, but each hoped himself lucky enough to be chosen. By the light of the setting sun her hundred handmaidens combed her golden hair and dressed her in stark white linen, ready for her suitors.

They arrived, each by caravan, at the gates of the splendid palace, flanked by all the servants the world of nobility could offer. They came bearing precious gifts from their homelands, the sight of which filled Odette with a curious delight. The princes were noble and handsome and paragons of royal excellence. And yet Odette could not choose from amongst them. For all that her many suitors had to offer her, love was not among them, not for her anyway. She could not give her heart to a single one.

Her father was greatly vexed by this and thought his daughter foolish for being so painfully difficult. However, he loved her dearly and wished no more for her to marry without love than he wished for her to live forever alone, so he indulged her discontented heart. When the King could find no prince suitable for Odette by his own means he, forced to desperation, turned reluctantly to magic for salvation.

He summoned the wizard Von Rothbart to the castle for his sage advice on how such a problem might be solved. Von Rothbart was a powerful magician who had traveled the world for a frightful count of years and tales of his talent for sorcery spread far and wide. The King did not fully trust magic but so desperate was he to secure some happiness for his daughter that he, trusting in Von Rothbart's abilities, admitted the old wizard into his court.

The magician was of great stature, tall and broad shouldered, and enshrouded in an earthy brown cloak with a mantle of feathers about the collar and a wide hood which covered his long gray hair. His face was sallow, his eyes large and yellow like an owl's, and his head was framed with thick whiskers below, gray with just the slightest remnants of red, and feathery eyebrows above. At his side was his enchanting daughter Odile who, though his direct opposite in stature and coloring, matched exactly his strange and mysterious aura. Her eyes, too, were his, Only sligher.

He bowed before the King and Queen, his pale skinned and ebon-tressed daughter doing likewise, and humbled himself.

“Oh great lord of Swan Lake,” said the wizard in a gravelly voice. “You have called upon my power to find for your daughter a love so true as cannot be found by mortal means.” Odette sat beside her parents, fearing the old man’s meddling would only condemn her to despair.

“You know well my command of the magical arts, else you would not have called me here so listen well, great King and Queen. By all my powers, I do this day vow that Princess Odette shall have a true love; one who will dwell forever with her, and she with him; one who will give his life for hers and gladly die upon the rising of the sun should any harm befall her.” Odette, herself, was stirred by the magician’s words and wondered if he truly had the power to find such a suitor for her; the prince she was destined for. He had the power, indeed, and would call upon it readily.

“What would you ask, Von Rothbart, in return for your aid?” asked the King eagerly.

“A mere trifle,” the wizard responded, his yellow eyes flashing maliciously. “I have already found Odette’s destined prince; I see him in the days that are to come. But he is not yet ready to be joined with her, nor she with him.” The brief show of wickedness in his face was overcome with concern, for a time, before inevitably surfacing again. “Therefore I should ask that, until she meets this destined love of hers, I shall keep her for myself and no man but I shall look upon her. She will be my most precious companion.”

The King could not help but laugh at such a jest, nor could the entire assembly there. Surely the old wizard was joking. But the magician’s cold sneer revealed the truth of his intentions and this enraged the King.

“How dare you visit such insult upon my house? Mighty your spellcraft may be, but you are no fit consort for my daughter! If this is truly your price then I’ll have none of your unclean arts!”

“But,” Von Rothbart cried, raising his gnarled hands above his head. “The spell is cast already and it does not lie! I have faithfully found Odette’s true love, just as you have wished. But they shall never meet for, through the centuries, she shall be mine and mine alone!”

The King’s patience was utterly spent and he called upon the guards to seize the diabolical magician and to banish he and his daughter from the palace. But Odette’s unfortunate father knew not the true extent of Von Rothbart’s power, nor the depths of his villainy. If he had, he would never have allowed the sorcerer to enter his tranquil kingdom.

The wizard’s eyes blazed with a demonic fury and wave of his hands cast the guards down in agony. “You would deny me my destiny?” the magician raged at the court. “You are as dust beneath my boots, so dust you shall become!” In an instant the terrified nobility was reduced to dust at his command and now, turning his claw-like finger upon the King and Queen, said, “Your crowns are a heavy burden to be set upon the heads of worms, and worms you shall be!”

Von Rothbart’s second vile proclamation came to pass as well and Odette cried piteously as she beheld the tiny squirming creatures her parents had become. “As for you, my little swan,” he said to the weeping princess. “I shall be your true love, to remain with you and give my life for you in every way my prophesy has decreed! If you truly wish to fly you shall do so but, as I

vow, you will never leave me. For every night your wings will carry you back to me. No other man will ever look upon your beautiful face again for they will only ever see a swan.”

His third proclamation came to pass and the princess Odette and her handmaidens were transformed into the most stunning swans, doomed to dwell forever in that kingdom and to assume human form only by night, when the moonlight touches the surface of the lake. As for Von Rothbart, he faithfully upheld his part of the bargain and kept a watchful eye on his beloved Odette from his throne in the castle, while the surrounding kingdom fell into ruin and became a land of ghosts and memories.

The wizard’s oath was no lie, for he did love Odette and she dwelt with him forever. But his love was a prison from which her resplendent wings could not rescue her. She had no comfort from Odile, who was as cruel as her father, and had only the companionship of her handmaidens who, when they did not weep for her plight, wept for their own for they, too, were trapped by the enchantment.

Years swept by; how many, exactly, none could say. But the sun rose and set on that lake perhaps a thousand thousand times and, all around, the world changed. Empires, too, rose and fell about that land. But the castle upon the lake only grew older and darker and grimmer. Prince Siegfried could see its black spires pierce the sky from the window of his bedroom. It had done so since his father’s father’s time and long before that, no doubt. Always it had intrigued him, the sight of that relic of a forgotten age.

“There’s naught there now but ghosts,” his nursemaid used to say to him. “Best keep your mind in the world of the living where it belongs.” And so he did. He was a strong young man and grew swiftly and with prudence. When his father died many feared for the future of the kingdom. But the Queen Mother knew that her son would make a capable leader when he was ready. Necessity forced him to be ready earlier than most before him.

“I’ve nothing but faith in you,” the Queen Mother would say to him. He was quite grown now and was the very image of his late father. His hair was a ruddy brown color, bold and earthy, and his skin had a hearty complexion, signifying his strength of character. “But really Siegfried, I believe it’s high time you took a wife.”

“Do you think I haven’t thought about it?” he responded. “And often? Every noble in the kingdom has come to offer me their daughter’s hand.”

“Why, then, do you refuse them all?”

“I cannot explain it, Mother, but I feel as if I am destined for another; a girl I’ve not met yet. I must marry her and none other.” The Queen Mother knew her son to be wise in all matters of state and possessing of an exceptionally rare moral fiber. In the matter of love, however, she thought him very foolish indeed. But he was still young, she knew, and saw the world with a young man’s eyes and, so, indulged his discontented heart.

“Let me at least aid you in your search,” she said one day. “I shall send word to the neighboring kingdoms calling for princesses and noble girls from far and wide to attend a grand ball here, and perhaps we shall find this girl you seek.” Siegfried did not hold much hope for his mother’s plan but agreed, at least, to make the attempt. The Queen Mother, on the other hand, was quite certain that her son would meet his future bride that very night. He had to. If he was to be king then he would need a queen.

The night of the ball, Siegfried's palace was host to only the finest of everything; food, music, decorum, as well as some of the loveliest ladies in the world. They came from lands near and far, hoping to make an impression on the prince and rule beside him as the next queen of his kingdom. Siegfried kissed their hands as they entered and danced with each one. They curtsied and smiled and laughed most enchantingly. But they made, despite their best efforts and most beguiling charm, little impression on the young prince.

Only one girl, he thought, stood out to him. Among the foreign guests stood an old wizard, large for one of such age, with his demure daughter. The girl seemed younger, even, than Siegfried, and yet had an otherworldly knowledge behind her bewitching eyes. Her hair was black as a raven's coat, as was her dress, and both fanned out like the pinions of ebony wings.

As they danced it was clear that the prince was haunted by her gaze, it was so unlike that of anyone else he had ever met. The magician watched as they stepped about the floor, his yellow eyes trained on his daughter and the prince. But Siegfried realized, before long, that this girl was stirring not love within him but fear, and excused himself after the dance.

He left her and went, alone, to the balcony overlooking the garden. The sky was changing from red to black with a rosy smear still clinging to the horizon. The moon was becoming clearer in the distance and, soon, the garden was flooded in moonlight. Below, by the little pond, he beheld a swan of uncommon beauty settle itself upon the water. He had seen many swans in those parts, and one was quite like another to him, so he wondered why this bird had struck him so.

He turned back to the ballroom where the celebration had continued on quite well without him. His mother, perhaps, noticed his absence, but no one else. When he looked back at the garden the swan was gone and there was, instead, a girl the like of which he could scarcely even have imagined. Surely no mortal woman was like her.

Her hair shimmered like golden thread in the moonlight and her white dress was lined all over with slender feathers. A little diadem sat upon her pretty head and he thought she must have been one of the guests. Why, then, had he not seen her before? She awakened such feelings in him as no girl ever had and he found his heart telling him that she was the one for whom he had waited his whole life. It seemed, for a moment, that she was looking up at him. But when he tried so desperately to return her gaze and send his love to her he found that she was gone. Only the swan sat within the garden and, in a moment, it had taken to the sky again and was gone.

Siegfried had no idea what he had seen that night but something compelled him to follow the creature. He leaped over the marble railing and into the courtyard where his huntsman had his crossbow trained on the bird. The Prince placed his hand upon the huntsman's arm and bid him lower the weapon. Then Siegfried mounted his horse and gave chase, keeping the flying swan always in his sights as it led him through the woods and toward the abandoned castle over Swan Lake.

When Siegfried arrived at the lake's shore the moon was already high and fell, rippling, upon the surface of the water. The old castle rose in the distance, its black shadow falling over everything. He alighted from his horse and stood under the cover of the nearby woods watching as the swan descended from the sky.

The bird set itself gently upon the lake and, before Siegfried's eyes, was flanked by swans on both sides. They were less beautiful, somehow, than the one at the head, but they were still unlike any birds he had ever seen before. They gathered together as the central swan dipped its long neck into the water and disappeared beneath the surface for just a moment. What emerged was not, to the prince's surprise, a swan but the girl he had seen in the garden. She rose from the water like Venus and, with her, rose the other swans for they, too, had become girls. She stepped wearily onto the shore as if the aforementioned transformation was a nightly routine that she had tired of after many years.

Her lovely attendants flocked around her, inquiring about her journey and how far she had gotten.

"Not so far as yesterday," she responded glumly. "I dread even to try again tomorrow. I'll never get beyond that castle on the other side of the wood before nightfall." She fell to crying upon the shoulders of her devoted handmaidens when she was startled by the rustle of foliage.

They looked up in concert and saw a young man, barely obscured, amongst the trees. They were set upon by a sudden panic and were ready to assume their swan shapes again and flee, but he, stepping into the moonlight, pleaded for them not to be afraid. "I am Siegfried, Prince of the realm beyond the forest. You've no reason to fear me."

"We do not fear you," the girl said, her eyes wide. "We fear only the ire of our master. Von Rothbart does not suffer other men to speak with me."

"Von Rothbart? That old wizard? Fear not, for he is presently at my castle and cannot harm you." The girl was hardly put at ease by this assurance, but she remained with the prince. She felt safe with him and found comfort in his admiring gaze.

Though she was forbidden to converse with other men or even to appear before them in her true shape, she had seen them in her afternoon flights and observed them from afar. This prince did not seem like them, though she knew not why. "How did you come here?" she asked, looking ever from side to side in fear that the magician was nearby.

"I followed you for, of all the princesses I had ever seen, none struck me so greatly as you."

"How did you know I was a princess?"

"I saw you in the garden of my castle." She was overcome as he spoke. "Were you not a guest at my ball?"

"No," she said, gazing past him to some distant place. "How was it that you saw Odette when all else would see a swan?"

"That I cannot say, but you are a princess, are you not?" She smiled now, for the first time in ages, and nodded slightly. She felt now that, after all those years, her destined love had come to her just as Von Rothbart had predicted. She then told him the story of how the wicked magician had stolen her father's kingdom and cursed her to live forever as a swan by day and his slave by night.

"I shall run the villain through," Siegfried vowed, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. But Odette calmed him.

"You do not know his power and I fear that his death would only doom me forever. Only once I find my true love will his prophesy reach completion and my curse be broken. Until then,

I am his, so he has gone to great pains to ensure that no man has ever come here to see me as I truly am.”

“But I am here,” he said, embracing her. “And I do love you. We were destined for each other, of that I am sure.”

“You must prove that to me,” she said. “And to him as well. You must prove to him that I am his no longer and, with that oath, we shall belong to each other. But only then.”

“Then I shall prove it. To all; to the whole kingdom. At sundown tomorrow, as soon as you are human again, come to my castle. I shall marry you before all gathered there and, I promise you, when the sun rises in the morning you shall not become a swan. Not ever. Not even if I must give my life to make it so.”

She was so overjoyed that her torment was at an end that she sat in Siegfried’s arms all night, as they whiled away the hours talking of their future together. Never before had either of them felt so sure that they were loved.

When Odette saw the red fingers of the sunrise creeping over the mountains, she knew that their time was at an end and kissed her beloved passionately. Siegfried was loth to let her go but one smile from her told him that all would be well yet. Tomorrow night they would be wed and their life would be one of unending bliss.

As she stepped back into the lake, ready to become a swan again, one thought and one thought alone made it bearable; it would be the last time she ever experienced it. Once the transformation was complete, Odette and her graceful handmaidens flew back to the shadows of the castle, for she no longer had the need to fly afar in search of freedom.

Siegfried glumly mounted his horse and left Swan Lake behind. And his going was watched by the yellow eyes of the great owl perched within the shadows of the trees. His eyes had witnessed their whole meeting and his ears had heard every sweet word they said to one another. They could not hide their plotting from him; not when he had spent so long preparing for this inevitable moment. He took to the sky and returned to the crumbling castle to plan his vengeance, followed closely by his companion, the jet black swan.

When Siegfried returned home that morning his mother demanded, lividly, where he had disappeared to all night. He told her only that he had indeed met the girl he would marry and that they would throw another ball that night as she became his bride. Then he retired to bed for as long as he could bear to sleep, for his eagerness kept him restless.

As for the Queen Mother, she relayed her son’s wishes for a wedding to the servants and the royal bakers, and to the florists and the musicians and the bishop, although she understood little what could have changed Siegfried’s mind in so short a time. Nevertheless, she was glad her son was finally taking a wife and would be sure to give him a wedding to remember.

While Siegfried’s kingdom was being prepared for the festivities, the sun was slowly sinking and Odette could scarcely wait for it to disappear, so impatient was she while her handmaidens flocked about her on the shoreline. When the sky was at last dark and only the moon shone, the lake stripped her of her feathers, except for those adorning her dress, and she made ready to flee into the night. The handmaidens vowed to keep the wizard busy in her absence, saying, “He knows nothing of your meeting with Siegfried last night. We will keep him occupied with stories and dancing and wine and he’ll never know you’ve gone.”

She kissed them goodbye and made off into the woods, always heading straight for the prince's castle and keeping its gleaming turrets in her sight. Seeing it rising honorably in the distance reminded her of how beautiful her own palace looked once upon a time and she began to dream of the life she would soon have with Siegfried. She could hear the trumpets sounding beyond the wood as they announced the start of the ball and she quickened her pace. Onward she pushed herself with fervent steps, determined to arrive on time.

But before she had gotten even halfway there she heard a heavy flutter, like broad wings beating upon the air, she was waylaid by the great owl who halted her escape with his huge yellow eyes. Drawing his brown wings about his body, the dreadful form of Von Rothbart rose before her and glowered at the frightened princess.

"Where is it you flee to so late, my insolent little swan? Did you truly think you and your prince could hide your designs from me? Have I not given you all that you desire? Wings to fly with, eternal youth and beauty, constant devotion and protection from harm?"

"Your wings and your love and your devotion are chains about me and your eternal youth is the cell in which I have languished, day by day, for longer than I care to remember. You yourself, long ago, said that my true love would find me and now he has. I've no need of your devotion any longer."

His eyes flared and he raised his talon-like hands toward her, crying, "I offered you love, but if chains you prefer, then wear them!" A dire coil of iron appeared around her arms and legs, clamped with heavy braces on her wrists and ankles. "Now you are dressed, not for a wedding, but for the immortality which you so ungratefully call a cell. A cell it shall be!" Then the wizard bore her, weeping, back to the ruined castle.

The hours passed at Siegfried's palace as the grand ball was underway. He had watched the sun descend over the mountains and had neither heard nor saw a sign from Odette. Hours passed and he now feared that the diabolical wizard had somehow discovered their plan. He was about to rush to the lake himself, but he stopped in his tracks when the heralds announced a late arrival. He looked to the entrance of the great hall and, there she stood, in a dress of black swan feathers. She gazed upon him lovingly as she approached and they held each other tightly.

"I am sorry if I worried you," she said. "But old Von Rothbart is cunning and escaping him proved a greater challenge than we thought."

"We never need worry about him again, he responded. "Tonight your curse will be but a memory."

After they danced Siegfried brought his betrothed before the Queen Mother, who marveled at her beauty, and they stood together before the bishop. There, in the sight of God, they were joined together and Siegfried made his oath to her.

"I now take thee as my wife, as a symbol of never ending love and devotion to you. Tonight I vow that you and you alone are my love and, in the shadow of such adoration, no malevolent magic can stand against us." The bishop granted them the blessings of Heaven and placed the crown on her head, declaring her princess, heir to the throne and queen-to-be of their realm.

The newlyweds embraced once more and none saw the look of contentment on the princess' face. None saw the satisfaction she felt at having seized the throne. None saw her

yellow eyes shining beneath the gentle smile she wore. None saw Odile, not even Siegfried. They only saw Odette, their new princess, and they loved her.

The wedding celebration wore on into the night while, across the forest, Odette sat despairingly in her cell, high up in the tower of the castle she once ruled from. Von Rothbart knew now that Siegfried was Odette's destined love and he was determined to put an end to the girl's hope of escaping her curse, once and for all. Knowing that he had sent Odile in disguise to trick the prince, Odette fell into a fit of despondency, for she saw no hope now for their love.

Her friend, the bluebird, heard her weeping and alighted on the edge of her barred window. Light from the swollen moon flooded the cell through the many great gaps in the old walls. He saw her curled up in the corner; her beautiful face stained with tears.

"What can I do, my princess?" the bird chirped sadly.

At first, she thought nothing could possibly save her but, in a moment, an idea came to her. "Perhaps it is not too late. You must fly, with all haste, to my prince's palace and warn him that Von Rothbart's daughter is deceiving him with my face and voice. Go now, as fast as you can!"

The bluebird took the message faithfully and fluttered over the lake and the forest with all the speed his little wings could muster. He saw the light of Siegfried's castle and flew into the great hall as the prince and his supposed bride were dancing blissfully in the center of the room.

Odile saw the bluebird and, knowing his intentions, tried to keep him away from her prince. but the little bird managed to reach Siegfried's ear long enough to relay Odette's warning and inform him of Odile's treachery. At first he did not believe it but when he saw his bride's reaction to the bluebird, he glimpsed in her a cruelty that he had never seen in Odette and felt sure she was incapable of.

Then his eyes beheld her as she really was; white of skin, black of hair, with cold eyes and a domineering smirk. He drew his sword and pointed the edge toward the witch, but she only laughed evilly at him.

"It is too late, young prince," called a deep, wicked voice from behind him. Von Rothbart stood in triumph with his clawed hand held high. "You, who are Odette's destined love, have this night given your heart to my daughter. Now your kingdom, and hers, are mine and Odette shall continue to be mine until the sky falls and the seas bleed!"

Siegfried lunged at the sorcerer with his sword but a single glance from the magician threw the weapon from his hand and cast him full upon the floor. Then the guests stared in horror as Von Rothbart, cackling, assumed the form of the huge owl and flew from the palace. Regaining his composure, Siegfried recovered his sword and, gathering a shield, bow and a quiver of arrows before his mother could stop him, ran to his horse and gave chase after the wizard.

When both her father and her new husband had left, Odile, with a look of supremacy, mounted the steps of the dais and, in full view of the Queen Mother and all gathered there, seated herself regally upon the throne and laughed triumphant.

The hoofbeats of his horse echoed through the forest as Siegfried pressed on toward the ruined castle where his true princess awaited him. The ominous towers of Odette's old palace could be seen through breaks in the trees, rising like horns into the night sky.

Never had the structure looked more dreadful and forbidding to him as at that moment. It was a stronghold of evil, as twisted and wretched as the man who called it home, and it bore not the slightest resemblance to the grand castle that once crowned Odette's kingdom.

The vast bridge which once linked the front gate to the shore had long since crumbled into the water. Thus, only the castle's enchanted inhabitants could swim or fly over the lake to reach it. Siegfried was troubled by this but the handmaidens, who had awaited him, brought him a little boat and ferried him across to the rocky island where the ghostly castle stood.

He leapt out to the boat, eager to fight his way to his love, but the little swan girls stopped him and warned of the haunted island. All the land was filled with illusions and apparitions as well as other fiendish magical snares left about the castle grounds by the sorcerer. They agreed to lead him by the safe ways up to the gate and into the dilapidated palace. The high walls were coated in moss and lichens and all the stones were in a state of slow decomposition. The thorny iron gates were covered by ages of rust and, though they appeared frightening and foreboding, they hadn't the strength they once possessed.

The handmaidens stepped swiftly and silently as they led Siegfried through a gap in the wall beside the gate and into the dismal castle. They had spoken truly, he thought, as he beheld the gruesome, restless specters which lingered in those halls; forever lamenting the loss of their noble kingdom torn asunder in but a night.

Not a thing within the castle had been removed or replaced in all those ages from the time of Odette's parents. But all was in a state of decay and the ruination Von Rothbart wreaked upon her world was absolute. Since no living thing could bear to serve the wizard, he employed only shades and ghosts to watch his domain and set suits of armor, animated by magic, to act as sentries. But the little swans knew how to deal with them and led them away while Siegfried crept up the tower and beat down the door of Odette's cell.

She threw her arms about him and, together, they made ready to escape. But the stairway was blocked by a line of haunted knights and they were forced out to the battlements above. They did not know, now, how they would get away but they hadn't long to worry about it.

The shadow of the monstrous owl fell over them as Von Rothbart landed upon the wall; his ragged feathers melting into the folds of his robes. The wicked magician grimaced and sent a bolt of lightning leaping from his hands. Siegfried lifted his shield, steadfastly defending Odette, and caught the thunderbolt in the center of the buckler. The impact caused him to lose his footing, momentarily, and so he had little time to react as the wizard gripped his shield and threw it aside. The two men struggled with each other in a brutal melee while the swan princess looked on in dismay.

Von Rothbart was strong indeed but finally, in the tumult, Siegfried's blade found its way to the magician's belly. Drawing back toward his frightened love, the prince watched as his enemy collapsed to the parapet floor, lifeblood oozing from him. The prince and princess fell into each other's arms, hoping that their trials were at an end. But it was not so.

"It is still too late for you," came the wizard's taunting voice, raspy and venomous. He drew himself up slowly, his cloak stained red but with no less power in his wicked yellow eyes. "Tell her, Siegfried," he sneered. "Tell her why she is doomed to be mine forever!"

Odette looked into her prince's eyes with tears welling up in her own. "No, Siegfried. The bluebird gave you my message," she wept. "You discovered Odile's deception and came for me!"

“All but too late,” Von Rothbart cackled. “Your precious prince is married to my daughter now! He has declared she, and only she, to be his true love.” He reached out and clamped his gnarled hand around her slender arm. “Your prince has betrayed you. Who but I will love you now?”

Odette felt the wizard was lying to torment her, as he always had. But when the black swan flew down from the north and landed, as Odile, beside her father, she corroborated his story. She wore the crown of the realm arrogantly on her ebony head.

“What I said to Odile means nothing,” Siegfried pleaded. “It is only you I love.”

“Your love will be a great consolation to me in my eternal damnation,” Odette responded sadly, barely gazing at him.

“I have always been there for you, my little swan,” the wizard groaned, holding his clawed hand out to her. “I promised you a companion who would remain at your side forever, who would dedicate himself to you and give his life for yours; who would gladly die upon the rising of the sun should any harm befall you. I promised you a keeper and a protector and have I not been all these things and more? Have I not given you all that I promised? Come back to me.”

She looked a moment between them, thought of Siegfried’s unwitting betrayal of her and enfolded herself in the prince’s arms.

“I would rather die with him,” she said to the wizard. “than to live another day with you.”

Von Rothbart’s eyes were set aflame at this defiance and he would not afford Odette the choice. He therefore set out to crush the prince once and for all. Calling upon all of his terrible power, he took to the air, transforming himself in the great owl and calling down a furious storm so as to split the battlements asunder. The stones cracked beneath the two lovers’ feet and they found themselves drifting apart.

Tongues of lightning shot down from the tempestuous sky while Von Rothbart wheeled overhead, the entire castle collapse around them. Even Odile began to fear now that her father had gone too far as the parapet shook beneath her.

“He cannot keep us apart,” Odette cried, leaping over the growing chasm and into Siegfried’s embrace. “If we are to die this night, we will do so together!” Wrapped in each other’s arms, they stood at the brink of the crumbling stonework and weighed a moment of distress together with an eternity apart.

“Do not be foolish,” Von Rothbart crowed from above. “Only I can save you!” He reached out with his talon to grasp Odette by the arm, but she would not allow herself to be taken from Siegfried’s arms, and his claw closed upon itself. The wizard’s eyes grew wide with horror as he watched the entire side of the battlements deteriorate and plummet, with the two lovers upon them, into the lake so very far below. As he saw this he realized that the end of his prophesy had, after so many ages, come to pass. Despite his attempts to foil their love, Siegfried and Odette truly did belong together forever and had proven it to all that night.

And as the morning began to break he remembered that, having lost Odette to the unforgiving waters below, his enchantment had condemned him as well and his own life was now forfeit. Already he felt his powers wane as the ruined castle fell to pieces. He swooped down, taking his terrified daughter into his talons and bore her away from the crumbling fortress. But the sun was peeking over the hills, filling his cruel eyes with its light, and he felt his strength at last dissolving. His magic had collapsed in on itself and, reduced to feathers and ash, the

wizard ceased to be. Odile, now lacking the power even to transform and save herself, fell to her death in the lake below.

By the time sun had fully risen the old castle had been reduced to rubble and the walls and turrets were deep within the waters of the old lake. The hundred little swans emerged from their hiding places along the shore and gathered around the ruins, and they found that they need be swans no longer. They stared in delight at the daylight, seeing it with human eyes for the first time in centuries.

And they, in a circle, reached their pretty hands into the water and drew up Siegfried and Odette who rose, side by side, marveling at the glorious morning. The prophesy had been fulfilled and now they would spend the rest of eternity in each other's arms. Neither death, nor pain, nor sorrow had any hold over their lives anymore. For their love had brought about the end of the wizard's spell and that love was the only power that, from then on, ruled over Swan Lake.

THE END