

## The Best Friends Part 1

### A Swan Lake Short by K. M. Shea

*When I wrote Swan Lake I made quite a few big changes—including adding males to Odette’s flock, and turning Benno—the prince’s best friend—into a girl. Unfortunately, as the story unfolds pretty quickly, while I was able to establish Benno’s sassy character, Misha’s intelligence, Nadia’s fierceness, and Odile’s sweetness, I didn’t get to spend much time on them at the end. So this is sort of their epilogue.*

Odette nibbled on a boiled egg and wondered how she could tactfully ask Misha what he was doing. Since Rothbart had been defeated and Odette had returned to her family—though she spent most of her afternoons visiting Alexsei at Tsona Palace—Misha had come to stay with her.

To be certain, Odette was glad to have him there! But before he was cursed, Misha had been something of a traveling scholar. She had long been dreading the day he would leave to continue his studies, though she knew it was his passion. However, her second-in-command had never brought up a departure and instead helped her reorganize the Black Swan Smugglers, who were still carrying out the occasional smuggling job.

He helped out on the farm, performing more physical feats than Odette had ever seen him attempt at their smuggler camp, and he journeyed with Odette to Tsona Palace whenever she went.

His willingness to stay seemed a little strange. She had mentioned as much to Alexsei, who chalked it up as his loyalty to her and the smugglers. But she wasn’t convinced.

In fact, Odette was starting to wonder if had something more to do with Misha’s warm feelings for Alexsei’s childhood friend, Lady Benno.

Odette adored Lady Benno for multiple reasons, first and foremost because she yanked Prince Yakov around like a dog on a leash. Benno was logical, intelligent, and—remarkably—was not prone to fainting spells as most ladies of nobility seemed to be.

But if Benno broke Misha’s heart, even unknowingly...

*I can’t ask him about it. He would die in embarrassment. I’ll have to observe them. If I can find any concrete proof, then I will approach him.*

Misha finished his porridge and looked from Odette to her gnawed-on boiled egg.

“Something wrong?”

“Nope.” Odette popped the egg into her mouth, buying herself time.

“When we go to Tsona Palace this afternoon, we need to look for a new shovel. I ruined one yesterday trying to dig up a rock.”

Odette wiped her mouth. “It would be efficient, but how do you propose we get it back?” Though their curse was broken, Odette and her smugglers had retained their ability to turn into swans whenever they wished. It made transportation to the palace quite easy. Odette and Misha could fly to the palace faster and use a more direct route than if they went via horseback.

“I assumed Alexsei would be willing to cough up a mount for his dearly beloved,” Misha said.

Odette glared at him and glanced at her mother—who was scraping the leftover porridge into a wooden bowl. “It’s *Lexsei*,” she growled. Her family was still unaware that the cheerful young man who courted her was actually Prince Alexsei—younger son of the Emperor and Empress.

“Of course.” Misha’s tone was dry and unconvincing.

Odette scowled at him but said nothing more about the matter until they were outside and away from her mother. “You can’t flash Alexsei’s name around like that, Misha.”

“Why not?” Misha rubbed his chin and curiously tilted his head. “Surely you wish for your parents to learn of his identity before the wedding—unless you mean to make our dear prince wait for some years.”

“No,” Odette sighed. “You’re right, I feel guilty for not telling them. But Alexsei really wants them to see him, not his title.”

“The Emperor and Empress publicly thanked you for your services against Rothbart and nearly drowned you in accolades. Even so, your brothers still fling mud at you, and your mother makes you wash your hands before you eat. I don’t think you have anything to be concerned about; they are grounded people,” Misha said. “In most cases, it is you who would have to worry about the public’s approval of your relationship with Prince Alexsei. However, as you have become the somewhat shady-moraled hero of Kozlovka, I don’t think even the stuffiest noble will object to your engagement with the Prince. Though I will say I think his father is still afraid of you.”

Odette bent over to fuss with her boots, not the beautiful black pair decorated with the swan buttons that Rothbart had left her, but a sturdy pair she used for farm work.

Misha was right. The only reason the nobles of the Kozlovkan court approved of her relationship with Alexsei was because she was the one credited with killing the evil sorcerer Rothbart. It was also why she felt like a bit of a sham. Rothbart had sacrificed himself as the final act of his master plan to buy Odile’s freedom from her mother and release her from his shadow.

She sighed. “It’s a mess,” she admitted. “But it’s a mess I wouldn’t trade for anything.”

Misha smiled. “You deserve this happiness.”

Odette shook her head but chose to change the topic. “Let’s see what my father wants us to do for the day.”

Misha nodded. “After you, Swan Queen.”



Odette hid her lips behind a porcelain teacup as her eyes flicked back and forth between Benno and Misha.

Benno ate a tart as she addressed the smuggler. “Odette mentioned you and Nadia are scheduled to help her deliver something for Lady Enchantress Angelique.”

“Indeed.” There was a slight stammer to Misha’s reply—an unusual thing, for he was annoyingly well spoken.

Alexsei sat next to Odette on the velvet cushioned settee on which she was perched and kissed her cheek. “Where is Odile? I thought she was staying with your family.”

Though Odette was heavily tempted to let her love distract her, she discreetly eyed Misha and Benno as she smiled at Alexsei. “The Lady Enchantress’s friends—a craftmage and his wife—are staying with Odile in her castle at Swan Lake. The wife apparently has a way to transform hellhounds. Odile was quite eager to see her use it.” She put her teacup down.

Since helping Odette and the princes attack her father’s castle, poor Odile had become quite overwhelmed. Odette did not think it was good for her to stay in her father’s castle, utterly alone (for the Black Swan Smugglers no longer camped on the shores of Swan Lake) and insisted she stay with Odette, her family, and Misha. Odile had gratefully accepted, until the temptation of Gemma—the seamstress who owned a white dog with black markings that used to be a hellhound—proved to be too great and lured her back to Swan Lake. (She didn’t blame her. Her parents’ modest cottage was quite cramped with the addition of Misha and Odile to the household. Also, she hoped the craftmage would be able to help Odile get a better grasp of her magic, or at least provide useful contacts for her.)

Odette blandly tossed her hair over her shoulder as Benno chuckled at something Misha had said. She risked a glance at the pair, taking in the sparkle of Misha’s eyes and softness of Benno’s usually sarcastic expression.

Alexsei took Odette’s hand, intertwining his fingers with hers. “Ahh, yes, Father received Grandmaster Craftmage Stil and Gemma here before they traveled on to Swan Lake. I believe he first met them at the Summit.” His thumb tenderly rubbed the top of her hand.

Yakov, of course, had to open his big mouth and ruin the sweet moment. “He said Gemma is close friends with the new Verglas queen. I’d like to speak to her and find out if the rumors are true about her.”

“Rumors?” Alexsei politely asked.

“They say the queen in the process of reorganizing Verglas’s military,” Yakov said.

Though Odette looked back and forth between her love and her future brother-in-law—now *that* was a frightening thought—she continued to keep tabs on Misha and Benno.

Benno murmured something, making Misha laugh. The noble lady grinned in response, completely ignoring Yakov, Alexsei, and Odette, and remaining focused on Misha.

Yes, it seemed her suspicions were right, and Misha’s admiration for Benno was one of the reasons he lingered. It did not, however, seem serious. Indeed, their shared laughs and smiles were barely more than a flirtation.

*I’ll have to talk to Benno about that.* Misha was an amazing friend—intelligent, loyal, and faithful. Odette liked Benno quite a bit, but she was a lady of nobility. *Are her intensions honorable? She is loyal and competent, so I would assume so, but she’s also titled and wealthy. Her marriage may not be up to her.*

Odette glanced at Yakov to see if he minded the attention Benno slathered on Misha. She had suspected Yakov would eventually propose to Benno—though she would be highly surprised if the practical girl actually agreed to it.

Yakov was unbothered. Indeed, he seemed gleeful he was avoiding her sharp watch.

She held in a sigh, feeling like a Father worrying over his daughter's suitors. Misha was capable of taking care of himself, but Odette had been his leader for so many years, and old habits died slowly...

*I will speak to Benno. I care too much about Misha to see him hurt.* Her mind made up, Odette returned her attention to Yakov and Alexsei, internally plotting to intercept Benno. Alone.

*To be continued in Part 2*