

The Imperial Prince is a Beast

I think the title says enough. ;) Enjoy!

Odette stumbled into Tsona Palace in the middle of the afternoon, tired, weary, and sporting a few cuts. She had just returned from a particularly perilous delivery on behalf of Lady Enchantress Angelique. Nadia and Misha had gone with her, but the three had been involved in a bit of a skirmish when they arrived to deliver the “item.”

Skirmish? More like a blood bath. Odette shivered and padded into Empress Sonya’s private study. She needed to make a few notations in her logbook, which the empress was kindly keeping. (Odette did not want to keep it at her house where her parents might stumble upon it. They had already voiced quite a bit of worry that she continued her smuggling career. If they knew how dangerous some of her deliveries for Angelique were, they would kick up a fuss, Lady Enchantress or not.)

Odette put her logbook on an angled desk, and began looking around for a quill and inkwell when the study door was thrown open.

Empress Sonya swept into the room. “Swan Queen! Just the hero I wanted to see.” The empress placed a hand over her heart and beamed as Lady Benno entered the study as well, closing the door behind them.

“Good evening, your Imperial Majesty, Lady Benno.” Odette curtsied, staggering when she straightened up. She secured her writing utensils and returned to her logbook.

“Odette, you *must* begin to call me Sonya,” the empress said. “You will soon be family.”

“Alexsei and I are *still* not yet engaged, Your Imperial Majesty,” Odette said. She plopped down on a bench pulled in front of the desk, and began making a few annotations.

“That’s your fault; I’m not going to take responsibility for it,” Empress Sonya said, narrowing her eyes.

Benno raised her eyebrows. “You have gotten distracted, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Ahh, yes. Benno is right. We have come before you today, Swan Queen, to petition for your assistance.” Empress Sonya seated herself in an arm chair that afforded her a view of Odette’s face.

Odette glanced up from her logbook, frowning slightly. *Why do I feel as if the empress is as crafty as a member of the Verglas Assassins’ Guild?* “In what way?”

“It is Odile,” Benno said. “She looks to you for guidance. I would go so far as to say she thinks of you as family.”

Odette relaxed and returned her attention to her logbook. *They probably want to use her wyvern for something.* “Yes.”

“Rothbart charged you with her,” Empress Sonya said. “And she trusts you.”

Odette scowled when her ink blotted. “She is a close friend, and I do feel a responsibility for her.”

“Exactly,” Benno said.

Empress Sonya smiled winningly. “That’s why we want you to talk to her about Yakov.”

Odette almost ruined her log entry. “*What.*”

“I’ve been watching them all summer,” Empress Sonya said. “And I am convinced not only does Yakov fancy her, but she would be a very good match for him—and for Kozlovka.”

“She is far kinder, and more aware of others,” Benno chimed in. “That would keep him from being so selfish.”

Odette stared at them in shock.

“So you’ll do it?” Benno asked.

“Absolutely *not!*” Odette thundered.

“Why not?” Empress Sonya asked.

“Because Yakov is a *beast!*”

“Ah-hah!” Empress Sonya triumphantly brandished a finger in the air. “That’s my point exactly! After all, if Odile can tame a wyvern, Yakov will be a cinch.”

Odette shut her logbook with more force than necessary.

“I am a little disappointed,” the empress continued. “For I very much wanted a deviant daughter-in-law who would play tricks with me, and Odile is far too sweet to understand my humor, but I will have you! You are cunning enough to make the oldest duchess jealous, and I am convinced your work-horse tendencies will greatly help our country. It is my greatest wish, then, that Odile would grind Yakov down until he eats from her hand.”

If the empress had suggested anyone *besides* Odile, Odette would have agreed. As it was, however, Odette would never willingly stick her friends with *Yakov!*

Odette bit her cheek to keep from shouting as she put her logbook away. “No. I will *never* recommend Yakov to Odile. She stood with me when I was cursed and it would have been easy for her to ignore us. She saved this country when she tamed her wyvern. She is a *hero*, not a sacrificial lamb that should be offered to Yakov because he’s an idiot!” She hastily clamped her jaw shut and glanced at the empress, worried she might have overstepped her boundaries.

The empress didn’t seem to mind in the least. Instead she swatted her hand through the air in a carefree manner. “Now you sound like Yevgeniy. He was very concerned about where we would keep the wyvern if they got married.”

“You must admit it, Odette, the possible identity of Yakov’s future bride is troubling,” Benno said. “She will be the empress. If he chooses an empty headed beauty...”

Odette sighed and rubbed the dark circles under her eyes. She ached from Angelique’s delivery. She was tired of hiding Alexsei’s identity from her parents, tired of dabbling in court politics and returning home to pretend all was well, and...just *tired*.

“If that happens I predict the fate of Kozlovka will rest on your back, as well as Alexsei’s,” the empress said. “Why else do you think Yevgeniy and I welcomed you so freely? We can trust you with the country if the worst should happen.”

“His Imperial Majesty doesn’t even like me,” Odette said.

“He does,” Benno said.

“Indeed. He is merely mildly intimidated...and concerned,” the empress said. “When he begins to witness more of your keen sense of humor, he’ll realize Alexsei has married a work-driven version of his mother, and hopefully then he will begin resting easier.”

Odette retreated to the glass door that opened up into the gardens. “If you’ll excuse me, I fear I must leave. My parents will be wondering where I have gone.”

“Safe travels,” Benno said.

“Think about what we’ve said!” Empress Sonya said. “Yakov cares for her—I can see it in his actions.”

Odette curtsied again and made her escape. Though she kept her expression bland, inwardly she fanned the flames of rebellion. *Recommend Yakov to Odile? What a joke! I would NEVER push such misery on her.*



By the time Odette staggered into her family's small home, she was spent beyond fatigue and was instead frolicking in the realms of exhaustion. She did not relish facing her parents looking as battered as she did, and, quite frankly, she was angry with Empress Sonya and Benno for their foolish suggestion.

Her mother, in the middle plumping pillows and straightening the quilts of Odette's bed, smiled. "Hello, my girl. How was your delivery?"

Frowning at the ground, Odette said, "It went well enough."

Her mother chuckled. "That's not what your expression says."

Odette guiltily raised her gaze to brave her mother's affectionate smile.

"I was just about to have a cup of tea. Would you like to join me?" her mother asked.

Odette nodded, and retrieved two clay mugs. She watched as her mother lit the fire of their samovar—a small metal urn used to heat the water and steep the tea, which was much more economic and quicker than stirring up the coals of the cooking fire.

When the water heated, her mother added chai tea leaves—a gift from Alexsei, little did her parents know they had been imported from Baris—and rustled up several tea cakes for them to nibble.

"Where is Misha?" Odette asked. "He should have gotten back before me."

"He did. I sent him outside to nap in the shade by the brook. Now, what's bothering you, my dear?"

Odette drummed her fingers on the table, pausing only to take the mug her mother offered her. "It's about Odile...and Lexsei's brother." She sipped the chai tea, exhaling with delight at the spicy, exotic flavor.

"Kov?" her mother asked. (Yakov had early on insisted on introducing himself to her family—which created quite a bit of anxiety for Odette as she was certain he would slip up. Thankfully, and remarkably, he had not.)

"Yes."

"What about them?"

Odette traced the rim of her mug. "Lexsei's mother told me she wants me to play matchmaker and recommend Kov to Odile."

"And?"

"And what? Isn't that enough?"

"I don't particularly see what's so upsetting about it."

"The Imperial Prince is a *beast*—that's what's upsetting!" Odette spat. Her eyes bugged as soon as she realized what she had let slip, and she would have slapped her hands over her mouth if her mother hadn't continued on, unbothered.

"I don't think you give him quite enough credit. I know he's done some silly, foolish things, but I do think he is a smart boy. Perhaps he merely acts the part to escape the pressure."

Relieved her mother hadn't seemed to notice, Odette snorted. "What could possibly pressure Kov?"

"Besides the crown and the throne you mean?" her mother asked sweetly. She smiled when Odette gaped at her. "Did you really believe we didn't know who your Lexsei was?"

"But, you—we—*how*?" Odette stammered, thrown dreadfully off balance.

"The whole country knows the second prince of Kozlovka is in love with the Swan Queen. We couldn't have avoided finding out even if we were deaf and blind," her mother said gently. "Your father and I decided that as long as you two wanted to pretend otherwise, we would honor your decision."

“How soon did you know?”

“Sooner than you would expect. But, Odette, it is important that you know we did not approve of him because of his blue blood or his riches. It is because he loves you and respects you.”

Odette stared at the table and mutely nodded.

“Now, about Yakov and Odile,” her mother continued. “Have you observed the two of them together with romance in mind?”

“No,” Odette admitted.

“Then why don’t you do that before you make any more decisions? First, though, you should get some sleep.” Her mother patted her hand.

Odette sipped her tea, then looked up to meet her mother’s gaze. “I really missed you while I was cursed, Mama.”

Her mother’s eyes glazed over with tears, and she reached out and embraced her. “I know, my girl. I know.”



The following day, Odette ventured to Odile’s castle on Swan Lake. In the beginning of summer, the dark-haired beauty had stayed with Odette and her family, but then a Master Craftmage named Stil and his wife, Gemma—a seamstress—had arrived in Kozlovka, and asked Odile if they could stay with her.

Odile, Odette knew, was happy to be back with her animals, and the craftmage’s and seamstress’s presence made it that much easier for her to live in what was once her father’s castle.

The craftmage had even helped Odile repair parts of it, so the castle was in the best condition it had been, probably since it was built.

Odette followed her ears to a banquet hall built just off a terrace. It currently held Odile and her pet wyvern, Gemma and her white dog, and—most surprising of all—Yakov.

Yakov smiled widely when he caught sight of her. “Greetings, sister-in-law.”

“Hello Yakov, Lady Gemma, Odile,” Odette said.

Odile ran forward to hug her. “It’s so exciting, Odette! Lady Gemma is going to transform the hellhounds!”

“Oh?” Odette swung her gaze to Gemma, who was staring at the collared hellhound that was picketed at the end of the hall.

“We’ll have to be fast if we want to transform the second hellhound as well,” Gemma said. “When Stil finds out what I’ve done he’ll kick up a fuss. Hello, Princess.” She smiled, softening the icy-gray color of her eyes.

“I’m not a princess yet,” Odette said. “Where is Master Stil?”

Gemma tucked some of her tea-brown hair behind her ear. “At Tsona. If he comes back early we’ll have to delay this, again. Hvit and I would like to end their torment.”

Odette glanced at the snarling, canine beast that writhed at the far end of the room. It howled, and foam dripped from its mouth. “It doesn’t seem very tormented. It seems unusually healthy, in fact.”

“Wait. You’ll see,” Gemma promised. She narrowed her eyes and removed several small crystals from her skirts. “Shine,” she said. The crystals erupted into light, casting a light as pure as white snow. “Ready, Hvit?”

The white and black dog stalked up to her side, its blue eyes glowing as it barred its teeth. Gemma stared at the snarling hellhound. “Now!” She shouted.

The white dog tore across the banquet hall, Gemma right behind it. It threw itself at the hellhound, grabbing it by its neck and tossing it as if it were a pup. The two creatures fought, but it was obvious that the white dog was far more powerful and agile than the emaciated hellhound. Soon it pinned the hellhound to the ground, his jaws still biting down on its neck.

Odette whipped out her daggers and almost ran to Gemma when the gutsy seamstress put her hand *inside* the hellhound’s mouth. She tried to push one of her glowing crystals down its throat, but the creature wriggled and snarled, twice throwing the white dog off it.

It snapped at Gemma—who darted backwards, but not quite fast enough so it grazed her, slicing her arm.

Odette ran forward, but Gemma shouted, “Don’t! Stay where you are, or it will get even more frenzied.” Her white dog attacked it again, throwing it against the wall when it tried to jump the seamstress.

Yakov put his hand on his sword and stepped forward, but Odile stood in front of him. “Yakov, please,” she said, her eyes glassy with tears.

Odette did not miss the way Yakov squeezed his hands into fists. She expected he would push past her—Yakov never missed a chance to play hero—and was shocked when he squared his shoulders and remained rooted in place.

“Just swallow,” Gemma growled, once again trying to shove a crystal down the hellhound’s throat. It took two more tries before she finally popped the crystal in its mouth, then grabbed its muzzle and shook its head. When she let go, light poured out of the hellhound’s mouth, and the creature howled.

Gemma tossed another crystal in its open mouth and shouted “Shine!” The light filled the room, and Odette had to block her eyes.

When the light finally faded, Gemma stood not with one white dog, but two. Her original dog—which was still the larger of the two—wagged its tail and yipped. The new white dog looked similar—it had black legs, black-flecked ears, and black markings around its eyes, although it did not sport the same back tail-tip as Gemma’s dog—stared up at Gemma with adoration. Its ears were flat and it whined and fidgeted. When Gemma knelt in front of it, it cried with joy and started licking her face.

“I’ll have to come up with a system to force feed them the starfires,” Gemma said. She almost fell over when her dog joined in with the licking and the two canines crowded her. “Stil is going to screech when he finds out I was hurt.”

Odile slowly approached her, Yakov following so close he was almost on her heels. “...Is it safe?”

Gemma wiped dog slobber from her chin with a grimace. “Perfectly.”

Odile knelt down and petted the newly transformed dog, tearing up a bit when the animal wagged its tail at her. “I’m so happy—I knew you weren’t all that bad,” she told it. When it pressed its black nose to her ear she burst into tears and cried into the dog’s neck. The dog bore it patiently, earning an ear lick from Gemma’s canine.

Odette joined them and rubbed Odile’s back, suspecting the girl was crying over much more than the redeemed hellhound.

Gemma frowned slightly, though her gray-blue eyes crinkled with concern. “Is everything—”

“What a dog!” Yakov declared, thumping the newly transformed dog on the rump. “This is certainly a handsome specimen.”

Gemma threw her arm around her dog’s shoulders when it sat down next to her. “I suppose so.

“In all my days I have never seen a dog like this. It must be an ancient species. What do you know about it?” Yakov asked.

Gemma glanced at Odile, but said, “Not much. We’re looking for more information, but it seems like no one has seen any breed like this before.”

“How exciting,” Yakov declared.

Odette scooted closer to Odile. “Are you alright?” she murmured.

“Yes, just a little overwhelmed,” Odile said in a small voice. She let the dog go and wiped her face, then put on a brave smile.

Odette offered her a hug, her heart squeezing when she could feel Odile trembling. “You’re loved, Odile,” was all she said.

“I know,” Odile said. When she pulled back, she scrubbed at her face again, then lifted her chin. “I think the dog wants to stay with you, Lady Gemma,” Odile said when the conversation lulled.

“But I know how much you like them—” Gemma started.

“I do, but it’s more important to me that they’re happy. What makes me gladdest is that you were able to change them for the better.” She smiled at the seamstress and stood up, brushing her dress off.

Odette glanced at Yakov, expecting him to say something stupid, but instead he nodded in approval.

“We’ll see,” Gemma said. “I suggest we leave that decision for later, and instead prepare for transforming the remaining hellhound. We are on a tight timeline.”

“Yes.” Odile scurried to the far side of the room. She patted her wyvern on its wedge-shaped head and retrieved her wooden flute. “I’ll get ready to lure it here.”

Odette glanced at Yakov, a frown playing at her lips. She was relieved when he said “I shall help you, fair Odile. As a man I cannot stand by and let you risk your life alone.”

Assured he still acted the same, Odette said—rather caustically, “She has a wyvern, Yakov. Your help is entirely unnecessary.”

“Nonsense. We are setting forth on a dangerous mission, I *insist* I be involved,” Yakov said.

“You really should probably stay here,” Odile said.

Yakov hemmed and hawed for a while, until Odile convinced him to stay put.

Odette scratched her cheek as Gemma and Odile trotted off, leaving her with Yakov. Yakov watched them go, his expression serious as he studied Odile. His brows furrowed.

“Do you think she is well?” he asked.

Odette leaned against a wall. “Gemma?”

“No. Odile,” Yakov said. “I fear the dog reminded her of her father.”

Odette studied her future brother-in-law, and seriously considered the empress’s request. Initially she thought the idea was ridiculous—Yakov was as stupid as he was handsome. But perhaps her mother was right. Even when she was under Rothbart’s curse, Odette had seen moments where even *Yakov* openly admitted his fawning actions were ludicrous.

Moreover, Odile did seem to have some sort of hold over him—she had seen that when escorting Benno, Yakov, and Alexsei through the castle when they first discovered the wyverns.

She had assumed it was because Yakov had a soft-spot for all gentle females, but she was starting to think it wasn't so.

They were terribly mismatched, but that almost made it better. Yakov would protect Odile's sweetness, and her kindness would temper his selfishness.

But it didn't matter as they weren't anywhere near love, yet. Yakov would have to smarten up first, and Odile had to adjust to her new life. But there was potential.

I won't say anything now. It's not appropriate. But one day, perhaps after Alexsei and I are married, I'll ask Odile what she thinks of him.

"Sister-in-law?" Yakov said, knocking Odette from her musings.

Odette sighed. "Why do you keep saying that when it isn't even true yet?"

"Because I am hoping you will not leave my brother out to dry much longer," he said, eyeing her.

Odette stared at him, then snorted in laughter.

Yakov frowned and scratched his head, looking thoroughly confused.

"Tell Alexsei to ask me," she said when she properly recovered.

Yakov smiled dazzlingly. "Excellent! Welcome to the family, sister-in-law! You will love being a part of it—particularly because then you will be related to great Kozlovkan heroes, like myself."

"Or maybe because then I'll be able to strangle you without fearing a death sentence."

Yakov laughed. "Perhaps. I look forward to it, sister-in-law!"

"As will I, brother-in-law."

Even if she was going to marry into his family, Odette still thought the Imperial Prince was a beast!

The End