

## The Best Friends Part 2

*This is a continuation of the Best Friends Part One—although technically all the loose ends will be tied up in the last freebie, “The Imperial Prince is a Beast.” I hope you enjoy this story arc!*

Catching Benno alone proved to be more difficult than Odette had estimated. While she frequently saw her, it was always with Misha or Yakov in tow or, even worse, at public functions.

It didn’t terribly bother Odette. She had been a leader of smugglers for years. Arranging a private meeting with Benno was a simple matter...provided she didn’t follow the normal rules of social etiquette and stuck to her shadier habits.

Those aforementioned shadier habits led Odette to recruit backup in the form of Nadia and fly to Tsona in the middle of the night. (How else was she going to intercept Benno without Misha knowing?) She and Nadia made the transformation from swans to humans in the handy fountain located in the gardens. Odette then retrieved the set of boots and daggers that awaited her—Alexsei had them placed in caches around the palace for her ease—and regrouped with Nadia to stealthily slink around the outer edge of the keep, as silent as shadows.

“What will you say to her?” Nadia asked.

Odette squinted up at the palace walls, trying to pick out Benno’s rooms. (Days prior, she had acquired intelligence from a palace maid to help her pin-point Benno’s quarters, but her night vision wasn’t as good as it used to be.) “My plan is to say as little as possible and have Benno do the majority of the talking.”

She found the correct balcony and nodded in thanks when Nadia boosted her up. She grumbled as she hefted herself over the railing, then hung back over the side to offer Nadia a hand up.

Without the weekly practices with her smugglers, Odette was starting to lose her physical edge. *I’ll have to do something about that*, she thought as she eased a dagger into the crack between two windows and used it to snag the latch on the other side that held them shut.

“You’ll be the lookout?” Odette asked.

Nadia—who, Odette jealously noted, looked just as fit as she had in the prime of their smuggling days—folded her arms across her chest. “Unless you need me for intimidation purposes.”

“I should be alright. It’s Benno. I like her, but...”

Odette and Nadia exchanged looks before Odette eased a window open.

She considered silently slipping into Benno’s rooms and ghosting up to her bed for the effect—if she was going to intimidate someone, she would like to do it right—but she knew Benno too well to think it was a good idea. There was a high possibility that Benno would react to the fright with violence or worse—a scream. While Odette was given free rein of Tsona as Alexsei’s unofficial intended, she didn’t relish the idea of explaining to the palace guards—and especially the Emperor, because he was always glumly lurking whenever there was a possibility she might make a mistake—what she was doing breaking into Benno’s rooms in the dog hours of the night.

So when Odette hefted herself over the windowsill, she took care to land with a thump.

Benno, proving Odette’s suspicions to be correct, snapped upright, a dagger clenched in her right hand.

“Easy, Benno. It’s me,” Odette said.

Benno blinked, and moonlight played on her dagger's blade. "Odette?"  
Odette meandered across the room and stood at Benno's bedside. "Yep."  
Benno peered past her, squinting out at her balcony. "Is that Nadia out there?"  
"Yes."  
"Are we in danger?"  
"No."

Benno shoved the dagger back under her pillow. "Then something must be wrong."  
"Not precisely."

Benno eyed her, slipped out from under her covers, and wrapped herself in a dressing gown. "Not precisely? I find that hard to believe. Why else would you secretly enter my rooms in the middle of the night if something was not amiss?"

Odette followed her to the two arm chairs placed in front of a fireplace that held nothing but burning coals. "Because we need to have a chat."

Benno's expression turned sour as she seated herself in one chair. "In the middle of the night? Are you feeling well? You're beginning to sound like Yakov."

Odette didn't sit, preferring to stand as the height would make her extra imposing.  
"About Misha."

Irritation fled the set of Benno's mouth, but she still warily eyed Odette. "What about him?"

Odette smiled like the edge of a knife. "What are your intentions towards him?"

Benno folded her hands together in her lap. "I wish to..." she sighed.

Odette stalked closer. "Is he a toy to you?"

"No," Benno said with vehemence. She scrubbed her face with her hands. "Never. It's just...." She scowled and stared down at her fingers.

Odette shifted but waited for Benno to gather her thoughts. *This must be important to her. She's usually calm and collected.*

"Misha sees me," Benno finally started. "In the courts, I am valued not for who I am, but for my title, my friendship with the Imperial family, my money.... Before I met you and the smugglers, no one wanted to be my friend; they wanted my advantages."

Benno cleared her throat and smoothed a lock of her hair. "I had resigned myself to my role as a supporting character—addressed only when it is necessary to appeal to Yakov and Alexsei. But then I met the Black Swan Smugglers, and I saw the way things could be. All of you worked together—no matter your age, education, or background. Even more important..."

Benno set her gaze on Odette, and for a moment Odette felt like *she* was the one on trial. "You saw Alexsei, even though the temptation of Yakov's title hovered in your range. You chose Alexsei, when he is often just as overlooked as I am. I thought if Alexsei could find happiness, couldn't I?"

Odette scratched her neck. "You think Misha will bring you happiness?"

"No. I will be happy because Misha values me for me. He *likes* that I prefer reading over dancing. He listens when I talk and ponders what I say," Benno said.

Odette was quiet for a moment. She could hear the pain in her friend's voice, and had witnessed echoes of it in Alexsei. It made her ache for both of them. Though she was the begrudging Swan Queen, she would never have to bear the burden of wondering if she was loved solely because of her position.

"I can't say I precisely understand, but I do sympathize," Odette said. "But, Benno...Misha doesn't love half-heartedly. He doesn't even offer friendship with reservations. If you don't have more than close companionship in mind—"

"I would marry him in a heartbeat," Benno said.

Odette blinked, slightly taken aback. She knew Misha had warm feelings for Benno, but she never guessed Benno's feelings were already so advanced. *It seems I was unforgivably distracted when these two first met.* "Yes," Odette said. "But can you?"

Benno lifted her chin. "I can marry whomever I wish."

Odette snorted. "Did your parents tell you that?"

Benno's shoulders drooped, and she fussed with her dressing gown. "Not exactly. But while my parents have certain expectations, my position as childhood friend to Yakov and Lexsei will secure my family's social standing. If it's what I want, they'll come around to it." She sighed. "But I don't know that Misha would ever have me."

Odette pressed her lips together and looked away. With time and encouragement, she was certain Misha would come to work his courage up. However, she was not going to tell Benno that. It was for Misha to say. So, instead, Odette chose to change the topic. "Thank you for your honesty."

Benno nodded, her eyes crinkling with sadness that she did not know was entirely unnecessary. After a moment, she burst into gut-deep guffaws of laughter. "What? Can't you see the humor in this situation?" she sputtered when Odette didn't join her.

Odette cracked a smile. "You mean normally it is a girl's father who shakes down her suitor, not the suitor's friend shaking down the girl?"

"It went better than I feared," Benno said soberly.

Odette curiously tilted her head. "You thought it would go poorly? Why?"

"Because it's *Misha* I have my eyes set on," Benno said.

Odette's smile turned affectionate. "Yes, but I've never made it a secret that I treasure you."

"I'm not some pampered, spoiled idiot, Odette. I know the reality." Benno shook her head and smiled fondly. "I am a girl you have known for mere weeks. Misha, however, has been at your side for years, helping you hold your crew together against a merciless curse, a cruel sorcerer, and poor odds. Your loyalty goes just as deeply as Misha's. If he would lay down his life for you, you would risk everything to be certain his happiness was assured. It's one of the reasons why I so heartily approve of you as Alexsei's future bride."

Odette stared at Benno, not exactly surprised by her observations, but shocked by the depth of them.

"I knew you would approach me at some point or another." Benno snorted. "Though I did not think you would ever sneak into my rooms at night. I should have known better though—you jumped Alexsei in the gardens in the middle of a guard patrol route."

Odette finally plopped into the chair and groaned. "It's not my fault. Prying Misha away from you long enough to get a word in edgewise was impossible. Although...perhaps he thwarted me on purpose." She tapped her lower lip.

Benno stared out at the balcony, where Nadia stood in the moonlight. "I'm glad Misha has you and Nadia," Benno said after a moment of silence.

"And I am glad Alexsei has you." Odette scrunched up her face and added grudgingly, "And Yakov." She sighed and eyed the sky. The horizon was still black, but if she wanted to

return home without rousing Misha's suspicions, she would need to leave soon. *He's worse than a fretful mother-in-law.*

"Thank you, Odette."

Odette blinked and returned her attention to Benno. "Hm?"

"Even after your curse is broken, you continue to work in the shadows, helping others. Misha told me about the secret meetings you've had with Angelique and other magic users." Benno eyed her, and Odette found she was very grateful that Benno was her friend and not her enemy. "It would be easy for you to focus on your own life now, but you haven't," Benno continued. "And you still find the time to love and support your friends. It's inspiring."

Odette briefly pursed her lips. "I think it would be more difficult to support someone in the open, like you do. Others don't see how your relationship with the princes offers stability because they're too blind. Thank you, Benno, for befriending Alexsei and Yakov, for loving them even when it would be so easy to resent them because of the isolation their friendship places you in."

Benno stared at her hands and woodenly nodded, though Odette could see her eyes were glazed with tears.

Odette glanced at the sky one more time and popped to her feet. "Your happiness will come, Benno," she promised. It was the most she could say, but even though it was little more than a vague wish, Benno smiled at her. It was a brilliant smile, one that made her astonishingly pretty—though her hair was mussed, and she was still wrapped up in a mere dressing gown.

Odette slipped through the open window.

Nadia raised her eyebrows, so Odette gave her the hand signal the smugglers used for "all is well."

Nadia nodded in concurrence, then turned to peer into Benno's room. The witty lady met Nadia's gaze, shifting uncomfortably under Nadia's stare.

Nadia took one of the daggers she had borrowed from Odette, used it to scratch her neck, and narrowed her eyes.

Benno nodded, eliciting a smile out of Nadia before she jumped from the balcony.

*Misha chose well.* Odette winked at her, then followed Nadia in jumping off the balcony.



Odette and Nadia sipped lemon tea from silver teacups imported from Torrens. They looked back and forth between Alexsei and Yakov—who were in the middle of a fencing match—and Misha and Benno—who were chattering happily on a bench a stone's throw away.

"Will you ever tell him?" Nadia asked.

Odette squirmed in her chair—Empress Sonya had forced her into a white dress for the afternoon, probably as a ploy to keep her from bashing Yakov upside the head. (She would never risk getting blood on such splendid clothes.) "Tell who what? Misha? That I cross-examined his lady love?"

"No. That Benno is in love with him." Nadia used her tea cup to gesture in the couple's direction.

"Oh," Odette said. "Nah."

Nadia blinked at her.

"It would give him an unfair advantage," Odette said.

"You've never been a champion of fairness before," Nadia said.

"Yes, well, he's the one who stuck me with the title of Swan Queen, so he deserves it. If he hasn't made a move in a year, I'll consider planting my boot on his rear to 'help' him."

Nadia snorted and returned to observing Misha and Benno. "He looks happy. But I'm glad you gave Lady Benno a talking to."

"Sorry, I should have thought to ask if you had anything you wanted to say to her," Odette said.

"I prefer to speak without words, and I believe my warnings were properly minded last night," Nadia said mildly.

Odette grinned at her, glad Nadia had agreed to the palace visit. She had rightfully been busy with her family—Odette would never begrudge her after the months she lost with her husband and young child—but Odette still missed her.

"I'm glad we're friends," Odette said on an impulse.

"As am I, Swan Queen." Though she used the ridiculous nickname, Nadia's voice and expression were serious.

"Living with our curse was horrible," Odette said, "But..."

"Sometimes the pain is worth the outcome," Nadia said.

The two exchanged smiles, and Nadia surprised Odette by adding, "I do miss our adventures."

"We could jump Benno again if Misha ever gets his courage mustered and proposes," Odette offered.

"We have time," Nadia said. "Misha is not one to move quickly."

"That is a shame," Empress Sonya said as she seated herself in a chair across from them with a flounce. "I had a bet that Benno's parents would announce the match by the end of the summer. It just goes to show I should do more research before I begin my gambling pools."

"Your Majesty," Odette and Nadia said. They set their tea cups down and moved to stand and curtsey, but the empress waved the formality off.

"Enough of that," the empress said. "Both of you must speak to me. Yevgeniy is holding court right now, and I claimed it was essential for the future of Kozlovka that I deepen my bond with my future daughter-in-law."

"Alexsei hasn't yet asked me to marry him," Odette pointed out.

"Semantics," the empress said. "It is widely known and accepted that the only reason he hasn't asked is because you would tell him *no*."

Odette protested. "I would tell him I am not ready yet."

"Just as bad," Nadia said.

"Indeed!" the empress said.

Odette looked from the empress and Nadia to Alexsei and Yakov—Alexsei, Odette couldn't help noticing, was winning the current match—and finally rested her eyes on Benno and Misha.

For four years, she had toiled under the weight of Rothbart's curse. She had missed seeing her little brothers grow up and had forfeited any chance of a normal life. But, Nadia was right. *Sometimes the pain is worth the outcome.*

The End