



# A New Tale: The Swan Knight

## Chapter 1

Morning had come—the morning of the coronation.

On this day, the throne of Taleswenn would pass to a young woman.

Before dawn in winter, the royal capital lay veiled in mist.

The stars still flickered in the heavens, while only the eastern horizon had begun to pale, heralding the coming sun.

The royal castle and the cathedral spired skyward like needles.

The whole kingdom seemed to hide its excitement beneath a hush of silence.

The Crimson Sanctum—the most sacred place in all of Taleswen, where the coronation rite was to be held.

It was there that the crown would be bestowed, and the new sovereign enthroned before the gaze of the High Hierophant, head of The Sacred Conquest Order.

He was the one who preached God's teachings to the king, advised in matters of state when needed, and bore the duty of guarding and guiding both monarch and realm.

He had served since the reign of the late king and queen. His hair was now completely white with age, yet his frail frame stood tall, and intelligence still gleamed in his deep blue eyes.

Clad in a mantle and cowl of immaculate white, crowned with a circlet encrusted with jewels, he stood beside the throne, staff in hand. When the young queen halted before him and bowed slightly, the attendant bearing the royal crown stepped forward. The High Hierophant lifted the circlet as though offering it up to sky.

Sunlight streamed through the stained-glass windows, setting the golden ornaments of the crown aflame.

The High Hierophant held it aloft and intoned the blessing in a voice so majestic it seemed to echo within the breast itself—smooth as flowing water, almost like a song.

The queen blinked, letting her gaze wander discreetly.

Everyone around her had closed their eyes, listening devoutly to the Hierophant's chant. Some even wept.

*It has not been long since Father and Mother passed away...*

Her parents—taken by a sudden accident.

It had been only a month. She could not leave the throne vacant in mourning forever, and yet... was such a mood of celebration truly fitting?

And though she stood there as sovereign, the young queen could not wholly suppress her doubt. Could she truly bear the weight of the crown?

But whenever such anxieties arose, all gave the same answer with one voice:

"As long as you heed the High Hierophant and follow tradition, there will be no problem."

The crown's weight pressed upon her brow, silencing thought. Slowly, the queen lifted her face.

Her eyes met those of the High Hierophant.

His visage was lined with age, yet his skin still glowed, and his gaze blazed with a vigor brighter than any jewel.

"Do not forget, Your Majesty," he murmured. "This crown is not yours."

"...What?"

His voice was low—so low it carried a trace of contempt. The queen's brow twitched upward for the briefest instant.

Before she could ask what he meant, the cheers of the crowd rang out:

"Long live the queen!"

The High Hierophant lowered the crown onto her head, pressing it slightly against her forehead.

"Forget not that God is ever present," he whispered. "You need not bear the burden of all things alone. Poor soul... it is enough to believe."

Dried blossoms of many colors showered down. The cries of the people rose in joy:

"A new queen is born!"

"Look at her beauty—like a saint in God's service!"

"Truly blessed, Our Holy Queen, blessed by God!"

"Our queen! Long live the queen!"

Seated upon the throne, the young queen felt it all as though from far away—as if it were happening to someone else.

That afternoon, preparations for the parade were complete. Leaving the Crimson Sanctum, she boarded the carriage that would take her through the capital.

Their destination was the eastern town of Eosterwen.

It was here that the first king had discovered a spring within the forest and chosen to found his realm. Once the site of the original royal seat and sacred ground for crown and kingdom alike, the capital had long since been moved elsewhere, leaving Eosterwen half-swallowed by the woods.

Its population had dwindled. Reports of wild beasts and attacks had led to a garrison being stationed there.

As the journey took but a few hours, it was customary for the new sovereign to travel there the same day, deliver a formal report, and spend the night.

As the carriage rolled along the road, the early-spring wind—still chilled with winter's breath—tossed the queen's hair.

Through the open window stretched the forest, its boughs still heavy with snow, yet dense and vigorous with green.

There—a dog.

A large hound, ears pricked. Its short brown coat gleamed, and its tail curled high.

Their eyes met.

The dog bounded through the snow, keeping pace with the carriage.

The queen leaned out to look more closely—and realized something.

*The air is freezing, but the dog's breath isn't white...*

But soon the carriage outpaced it. The dog faltered, dropped behind, and at last stood still in the snow, only watching as she was borne away.

Having visited the royal tombs and delivered her report of succession, the young queen entered the palace reserved for the royal family.

Her maid, Fiona, prepared the bed and placed warmed stones at its foot.

"Spring will soon be here, Your Majesty. Once the flowers bloom, all the realm will be filled with joy at the thought of your betrothal."

"Betrothal? No one has spoken of such a thing to me."

"But Your Majesty, the royal line must be continued. That, above all, is an urgent matter. If possible, more than one child is to be hoped for—hence the sooner, the better."

"Yes, I understand that... yet..."

"Even in the era when you were a princess, it was not uncommon to be promised to someone. At your age, common women would begin to have such expectations."

If two or more heirs were expected, then it was only natural that she should be married as soon as possible.

"Fiona, do you wish to marry soon yourself?"

"If I could, I would. Though I would rather serve Your Majesty and the royal family long enough to repay my debt of gratitude..."

Fiona fell silent, glancing around. Voices echoed faintly in the corridor outside—it was only the maids, and they soon passed.

"...Among the royal guards admitted each year, there are some who grow close with the maids."

"And what of that?"

"Oh, Your Majesty!" Fiona flushed. "Do you not know? The teachings of the The Doctrine of the Burning Dawn forbid such conduct except between married husband and wife. To lie together for any reason other than to bear children is sin. That is why some maids... and the knights... quietly leave the palace. My own chance at marriage may well be delayed."

"I see... so that is the way of it. Fiona, you are truly capable. I rely on you greatly. But yes, it is true—you, too, should have leisure."

"Yes. I long to serve at your side, but I also wish to bring good news back to my family. If Your Majesty had someone to rely upon... then one of our greatest worries would be gone."

"The royal house must endure—I do understand that much. Marriage is indeed of the highest importance."

"I am relieved to hear you say so. Tell me, Your Majesty—what sort of man would you desire?"

"Desire..."

Am I even allowed to desire? If The Sacred Conquest Order does not approve, then no one would be permitted.

The queen swallowed such words, smiling vaguely instead.

"If he were sincere, I would be glad."

When Fiona withdrew, the queen was left alone.

Though maids and guards stood beyond the door, keeping vigil through the night, the chamber felt strange and unfamiliar in its darkness.

The white canopy cut her off from the world. On any other night, that barrier would have brought her comfort. But not tonight.

She pushed aside the drapery, slipped on a fur-lined cloak, and stepped down from the bed.

She did not care that the floor chilled her feet. She went to the window and gazed out.

The weight of the crown still seemed to linger on her brow. And marriage... life was changing swiftly, swept along by forces beyond her will.

She exhaled softly and leaned against the sill.

She had thought the night would be dark, yet it was not. By moonlight even shadows were visible.

At this season, could the night truly be so bright?

Strangely, the glow felt warm, almost welcoming.

And when her gaze strayed toward the forest—there, she saw the dog.

"Ah..."

It was the very same hound that had pursued the carriage earlier.

Their eyes met. The dog spun in circles, then turned and looked back at her—as though beckoning.

At this hour...? Am I truly to go out into the night?

Yet she felt she must follow. Perhaps it was nothing more than a kind of escape—but instinctively, the queen pushed open the window, leaned out, and went forth toward the waiting hound.

Outside, a full moon shone, accompanied by countless stars.

*With a full moon, the stars should be hidden...*

The queen recalled something she had once been taught by her.

When she arrived, the dog wagged its tail and began walking slowly ahead, as if showing her the way.

The only footprints in the snow were hers.

"Who are you...?" she asked, but the dog did not turn back—only continued deeper into the forest.

As she followed the path formed by trees that still held their leaves, she realized that though snow covered the ground, she no longer felt the cold.

*A dream...?*

If it was a dream, it would make sense.

And yet, her breath came out white, and she could taste the air.

Bathed in moonlight and starlight filtering between the trees, she walked on until the dog suddenly dashed forward and stopped in front of a giant tree in an open clearing.

"Ah... so you've finally come."

It was the voice of an old woman.

From a hollow in the tree, the owner of the voice emerged, wearing a tattered gray robe, stroking the dog as it frolicked around her.

"You are..."

"How long it has been. Back then, you were but a tiny little princess."

The queen slowly stepped closer.

The woman was stooped with age, making her barely half the queen's height.

"...honored matron do you know me?"

"But of course, of course. I have known you since the day you were born."

The old woman's thin, twig-like fingers brushed the queen's hand—and in that instant, the queen gasped.

Yes—this was the one who had taught her so much:

How to read the stars, how to brew herbs, how to recite poetry... but all of it had ended halfway.

She had grown afraid—pressured by something...

"honored matron, why are you here...?"

"I can live only here now. But it is fortunate. That you have come—this is a wondrous sign. Come, Your Majesty. Let me grant you a blessing as well."

The old woman brightened with a smile and beckoned her.

Passing through the tree's hollow, they went further inside, to a small hut built of stacked stones. There, the queen was served tea, which she drank without hesitation.

It was a floral tea, warmed and fragrant. At once her breath eased, and her body grew warmly comfortable.

"This taste... it's nostalgic."

"You remember, then?"

"A little... I used to come to you with dreams, to seek your counsel."

"Yes, yes. You cried then, saying the stars were leaving you."

"The stars..."

Had she dreamed something like that?

The moment the thought flickered through her mind, she felt a prickling pain in her head.

"I haven't remembered everything..."

"That's all right, for now. Here—take this."

The old woman held out a white veil. It was woven from delicate, smooth threads, translucent, embedded with glittering, star-like stones. When touched, it had just the right firmness; when spread, it floated like mist.

Never had she seen such exquisite craftsmanship—not even among offerings to the King.

"You've drunk the tea, so you're ready. Take off your clothes, don this, and go to the river. Wash yourself clean, and at the spring you will receive a blessing. It will become your protection."

Guided by the woman's words, the queen undressed, and draped the veil over her bare skin.

It clung with a strange sensation, seeping into her body—light, yet substantial, deeply comforting.

"Now, purify yourself with this."

The woman handed her a small pouch.

Carrying it, the queen followed the dog deeper into the forest once more.

Despite the snowy world around her, her body stayed warm, and no other creatures stirred.

From nowhere, she heard something like a woman's song, though another voice whispered that it was simply the sound of the sea wind passing.

"Is this a dream?"

She asked the dog walking at her side. The dog tilted its head adorably, making her smile.

"A dream then. After all, you leave no footprints."

But her own prints were clear in the snow.

When she reached the river, she dipped her hands in and trailed the smooth water over her shoulders.

The pouch contained something pure white...

"Salt?"

She tasted a little—it was as salty as the sea.

"So this is to cleanse myself?"

She asked the dog. It nodded.

Rubbing it over her arms, shoulders, neck, back, chest, belly, and legs, she washed herself and then waded into the river to purify her body.

Ascending upstream, she arrived at a spring bubbling with foam.

Pale mist drifted among the trees. Snow like soft feathers danced through the air. Branches stretched wide as if guarding the spring, reflecting moon and starlight upon the water.

Rocks dotted the way, and she could move further in.

Splashing through the water, she swam to one, wrung her wet hair, and shook it dry.

The veil dried quickly, spreading lightly like wind, weightless.

Chasing after the dog, she came to a hollow in the rocks where dripping water collected.

Plip... plip... The rhythmic sound echoed in her ears.

When the queen peered into the pool, she saw reflected there a face—her own, but with eyes more radiant than usual.

"...!"

At that same moment, Alvaern caught his breath.

Standing by a dark, otherworldly spring, his silver hair flowing in a gentle breeze, he reached out toward the image of the woman—the queen—reflected before him.

From her side, she could not see him.

For this spring was a magic mirror, a water-glass showing the state of the other world.

—At last, in the heart of that forest, in the final sanctuary guarded there, the queen had appeared.

"I've found you..."

Alvaern gently touched the queen's reflected cheek, sighed with relief, and turned away.

He walked toward a castle of pure white walls.

There, treasures of infinite healing power were enshrined, and knights had sworn eternal guardianship.

And the master of that castle, the Knight-King, was none other than Alvaern's father.

On the corridor overlooking the sea of stars, Alvaern spoke to his father's back.

"In that world... A woman who will become a my wife awaits."

"That world is in turmoil."

"All the more reason someone must go. We discussed this only the other day, did we not?"

"True. But for now, we can only plant seeds for the future. Even you, if you reveal your name, will lose your body."

"I understand."

Alvaern stood beside the Knight-King.

Watching the slow-drifting stars, he exhaled softly.

"I cannot leave her be. She is where she should not be. And yet, if even that is necessary..."

"Ah... then there could be no greater opportunity."

The Knight-King slowly turned.

"The shadows grow so thick we no longer know what lurks within them. The sanctuaries shrink, some destroyed, defiled, their power dulled. You will be bound by restrictions as well. But if your wife is there, you are more suited than any knight. Protect her, keep her from being consumed."

Together, Alvaern and the Knight-King gazed at the golden, radiant full moon.

"...Soon, the stars will announce your departure. Prepare yourself."

"Yes, father."

## Chapter 2

Bathed in the morning sun, emeralds shimmered as if melting into light.

Rubies gleamed, deep as blood.

Gems shone white, like stars.

Set into gold, these jewels crowned a circlet whose ten spires rose like swordpoints thrust toward the sky.

Its form burned with brilliance; when enshrined upon the altar of the Crimson Sanctuary, it seemed a living flame, swaying with the incense smoke.

Purple blossoms had been engraved into the gold, painted in vivid hues—beauty that only deepened the more one gazed upon it.

More lavish even than the crown of kings, it was fitting for the god who once saved this kingdom from barbarism, and for the knights who walked beside that god.

Only one who endured the most severe disciplines, who possessed wisdom and compassion enough to guide the people, was permitted to don it.

Only the one who bore the title of High Hierophant.

He placed the crown upon his brow, exhaled deeply, and closed his eyes. Never had he known such sweetness, such ecstasy that seemed to set every fiber of his body alight—except when

granted through the crown itself. Even its weight carried not only fear, but reverence, love, and above all, a swelling pride.

"High Hierophant."

The voice of a young woman brought his eyes open.

He set aside the crown and turned. Below the crimson-carpeted stair stood Fiona, the Queen's handmaiden.

"You? How fares Her Majesty?"

"She has voiced no objection to marriage. Nor does she seem hesitant about bearing children."

"Then a consort must be chosen—one worthy of the Queen, one brave enough to guard this realm."

"Perhaps a lord from a foreign land?"

"Indeed, if he has studied our teaching—the Doctrine of the Burning Dawn. And the candidates?"

"About twenty-five..."

"Quite many. Word of Her Majesty's beauty must have spread."

Fiona gave a vague nod.

"Those with base desires are poison to the Queen."

"Of course. This kingdom is a holy realm, saved by the blood of God and God's knights. Even this carpet is a sign of that. Her Majesty, we handmaidens, all are under the Doctrine's protection. Those ignorant of its teachings shall be excluded—so you may rest assured."

"Good. You are a fine disciple. God Himself will surely praise you. Tell me, how many years since you received your name from Him?"

"Fifteen years."

"Then the time is near when you too should be joined in marriage..."

Fiona's eyes widened. For an instant her lips softened into a smile, but she quickly lowered her gaze.

"What of my love for God? Could I love both husband and God?"

The High Hierophant laid a hand upon her shoulder, his voice gentle.

"A wife's love for her husband is love for God. He does not divide between the two. The very moment you are bound to your husband, you are held within His divine embrace."

The sound of water trickling from a spring into a river echoed faintly.

And within it, another voice began to resound—one achingly familiar.

*Trust not those who adorn cruelty with beautiful words.*

*Do not hastily call lovely those who clothe themselves only in appearances.*

*True beauty seeps from within; truth is born of the soul.*

*Sweetness is not the same as kindness.*

*A father and mother raising a child must sometimes speak with stern words.*

It was the old woman's voice—so clear she might have been standing beside her.

When she opened her eyes, the Queen found herself in her canopied bedchamber.

*...Was my reunion with honored matron only a dream?*

Her gaze wandered the room. Everything was neatly in place, the windows closed, no sign she had ever stepped outside.

Perhaps it had been a dream...

But when she rose, the cloth that had draped her shoulders slid to the floor.

The veil the old woman had given her.

“...Not a dream...”

A week had passed since the Queen's return from Eosterwen to the royal capital.

On this day, a trial was to be held within the Crimson Sanctum.

The air was grim and heavy with the presence of knights in full armor. Bound prisoners were led inside beneath their watchful blades. From the lines of onlookers, townsfolk sprinkled water upon the accused—as ritual cleansing.

“More arrests?” the Queen asked the cleric walking at her side. “What crime have they committed?”

The priest bowed low, his back bent as though the question itself were too weighty.

"They have transgressed the Law."

"What law? They hardly seem dangerous."

The accused walked on, shrinking into themselves, their faces pale, eyes lowered, on the verge of tears. They were young, almost all of them.

"They abandoned the work assigned to them," the cleric answered.

The Queen turned sharply.

"That is hardly a grave crime. Is all this truly necessary?"

It looked more like a display than justice. Their hands were bound with rope, their bodies marked by torture.

"There is no lesser or greater sin," the cleric insisted.

"Then allow me to phrase it differently: it is no sin at all. According to the old laws of the kingdom, a man may freely choose his trade."

"Your Majesty, old laws are full of flaws. The Doctrine of the Burning Dawn is the new Law, given by God who saved us through His knights."

Fiona spoke more firmly, her voice edged with rebuke.

"The land is rife with criminals. Some say whole bands of them hide underground, plotting rebellion against the crown."

"That was nothing more than rumor," the Queen countered. "I remember it was investigated—and disproven."

"Rumor or not, the knights must do more. Perhaps their numbers should be increased?"

The next prisoners were led in.

"Accused of illicit relations..." the herald proclaimed.

"Ah," Fiona whispered, "she once served in the castle. Betrothed to be married—until she consortied with a knight from abroad."

The Queen recognized the girl. She remembered how radiant she had been, blooming like a flower in its prime.

"Then knights should wed only those of our own land."

The voice came from behind. The High Hierophant himself.

Today he wore the jeweled crown, a white hood, and a mantle—his most solemn vestments, unseen since the enthronement.

"It is those who uphold the Doctrine who are fit to be knights," he declared. "Not men who would endanger even the future of a single woman."

With those words, he raised a crimson-bound book, leaned upon his staff, and ascended to the altar.

When he took his seat, a breath of awe swept through the gathered crowd. Their eyes shone as if gazing upon a vision. Fiona, too, clasped her hands before her breast like a maiden beholding her ideal.

The Queen watched him from across the hall—resplendent upon his high throne, set so that even the statue of God seemed hidden behind his back.

"Pitiful souls," the Hierophant intoned. "If your fault was but a fleeting weakness, God shall soon forgive. The laws set down are not to crush your hearts, but to guard you—and the realm."

Among the crowd, some wiped away tears—The family of the sinner.

"Submit to God, and to me. Believe, and cast away needless doubts. I shall lead you to the promised land of faith."

As he spoke, the flames upon the altar leapt as if in answer. From his hands spilled a golden dust, cascading upon the prisoners and their kin.

The crowd gazed, entranced.

"How blessed we are..."

"How noble he appears..."

"You are fragile," the Hierophant said softly. "You are sorrowful. But God and I are always watching. By nightfall, your sins shall be absolved."

"Thank you...! Thank you!"

The jeweled crown upon his brow caught the dying light of sunset and blazed.

*What... was that...?*

The Queen turned restlessly in her bed, unable to rid her mind of the people's intoxicated gaze. The way they seemed eager to be chained—joyful in their submission—sickened her with loathing and fear.

The Sacred Conquest Order had once been founded by the holy knights who freed the kingdom from barbaric monsters. Carrying the Book of the Burning Dawn, they had cut their way through forest with sword and spear, driving out the terrors lurking within.

Since then, they had won the king's trust, built halls across the realm, spread their doctrine to neighboring lands, and risen to hold power second only to the crown.

At the summit stood the High Hierophant, permitted to wear a crown more dazzling than the king's. From the Crimson Sanctuary he presided over rituals, trials, royal marriages—even war itself.

The Queen had overheard foreign merchants whisper: "This realm is not ruled by its king, but by its creed."

"...Haa..."

The royal house existed only to bear heirs, preserve its line, and safeguard the faith. She had begun to sense as much.

Unable to sleep, she rose and went to the window. The stars glittered, and their sight comforted her.

The stars will depart, the old woman's words returned.

Had she confessed suces to her? She could not remember clearly, but her heart told her it was so. After all, she had often gazed at the stars and read them: the flowers will soon bloom... the harvest will soon come.

"The stars... departing."

The phrase struck her as unbearably sorrowful. Had she spoken of it to her honored matron, even wept in her presence?

As she whispered, a knot within her loosened, and the voice returned in full:

*You are the Gate of the Earth.*

"The Gate of the Earth..." she repeated, stroking her chest, not knowing what it meant.

"Soon... that star will arrive."

She drifted into sleep. And in her dream, she once again ran across the veil until she reached the forest.

Knowing she dreamed, she sought out the old woman—who awaited her with a knowing nod.

"honored matron... why must we endure such things?"

It was not the trial itself she spoke of, but the people—their faces, their surrender—that had filled her with dread.

The old woman seemed to understand. Lowering her gaze in sorrow, she murmured as though dropping the words to the floor:

“Because they have forgotten the voice of the land. When the wisdom of our ancestors is severed, people clutch at chains handed to them from outside.”

“What do you mean?”

“You too must remember. Once, this kingdom was green and blooming, its people dreaming, speaking, sharing—a land abundant with life.”

“Here? This place?”

Now the realm was a place of ceaseless patrols by knights, suspicion in every street. To survive, people clung to The Sacred Conquest Order; only its laws could cleanse them of guilt. To dream was dangerous. To mingle freely with foreigners meant arrest.

Nature had withered away, replaced by grey spires—so many that the land seemed cloaked in perpetual haze.

Yet she had heard that once, the kingdom thrived on trade and exchange with other lands.

The old woman lifted her eyes, smiling gently.

“Queen, the Swan Knight will soon come. He is your blessing. Wait for him.”

At her words, the Queen’s heart raced—filled with a strange mingling of hope and fear.

“What if we reopened trade with foreign lands?” the Queen proposed without delay.

“We could send our own students overseas, forging ties across the sea. It would broaden young minds, and create new work for our people.”

The councilors stroked their chins in silence, feigning contemplation.

“In our present state, trade would devour us in an instant,” said Duncan, the eldest and most influential among them.

“The sons of farmers already flee their homes; if we send students abroad, they will seize the chance and never return.”

Others quickly added their voices:

"If barbarians come flooding in, our order will collapse. With winter's stores depleted, we can hardly provide lodgings for merchants."

"And worse still are the endless arrests. These young ones could simply inherit their households, yet they rebel. What are they dissatisfied with?"

"Nor do I understand adultery. There are even those who refuse the Hierophant's sacred gold-dust, choosing prison instead—swearing they would rather elope! In this cold, in a stone cell, their lives may be forfeit..."

The Queen's hand tightened against her chest.

*This cannot go on...*

But how to change it? The crown upon her head seemed to crush her skull, her temples throbbed until she felt sick.

"Your Majesty," Duncan said firmly, "you are still newly enthroned. Your concern for the realm is admirable, but for now—trust us. Rely on us. You are not yet wed; if you overburden yourself, your health will suffer."

Don't nod... don't nod, she told herself.

Yet her head grew suddenly heavy, her chin sinking despite her will.

"That is better," Duncan soothed. "You need not bear everything alone. The council and The Sacred Conquest Order stand always at your side. Ah—yes, your marriage must soon be arranged."

"A joyous matter indeed. But who could be worthy?"

"The minister's son of that neighboring realm, perhaps. He is well-versed in our Doctrine..."

"Or Duncan's own son, Tarlow—handsome, close to Her Majesty's age..."

Their voices blurred into a distant murmur as her pain worsened. Thinking itself was agony.

Night came at last. The Queen removed her crown, and with the veil honored matron had given her draped across her shoulders, she sank into deep sleep.

She dreamed.

Beneath a sea of stars, a knight approached—borne upon a swan-drawn ship.

His hair flowed silver like waves on a tranquil sea, his armor gleamed white as frost. At his side hung a horn and a sword.

He fixed his gaze upon her and spoke:

"If you would have me as your husband, then you must never..."

"Yes... as you say..."

Her own voice startled her awake.

The first light of dawn pierced the curtains. Outside, a bird trilled upon a branch, heralding spring.

*An old dream... yet I saw his face for the first time.*

It was noble—where intellect and passion lived together in his features. Warmth spread from her chest like fire, until she found herself humming softly.

*Soon... the star will come...*

The thought echoed within, though it felt like another's voice.

Her ladies entered to ready her for the day. Fiona brushed her hair, then tilted her head with a teasing smile.

"My, Your Majesty, your cheeks are flushed—like a ripe apple."

"Are they?"

"Indeed. Like a new bride's. It must be the talk of your marriage."

"That matter has only just been raised."

"Even so, such matters advance quickly. I long to care for a young prince or princess myself!"

The Queen touched her brow, but Fiona was right—the matter was moving quickly.

The Hierophant had conferred with the council. It was resolved: the Queen's marriage must be settled without delay.

Portraits arrived, one after another, each suitor described in detail.

Yet none bore the face from her dream. Her heart sank.

*A dream is only a dream...*

But she could not forget.

The honest light in those eyes that looked straight into hers.

"An engagement—even in form alone," the Hierophant pressed.

The Queen caught her breath.

"An engagement?"

"Yes. If suitors are rejected one after another, it may bring calamity upon the realm. A neighboring prince, a northern merchant—all fine candidates, yet none decisive. In my view, Lord Duncan's son Tarlow is most fitting."

The Queen looked upon Duncan. His son, tall and keen as his father had once been in the days of generalship, was admired widely for his beauty and wit. But he was Duncan's only heir. If he married her, what would become of their house?

"If it is so, it would be our highest honor," Duncan declared.

"No... it must not be. Your family name cannot be extinguished."

"A son-in-law may be taken in. You need not worry, Your Majesty."

"But surely Lord Tarlow would find happiness with another—an accomplished woman, fair and strong, fit to be his wife..."

"To serve you, Majesty, is the highest honor. There could be no refusal. If the Hierophant blesses it, it is as if God Himself approves. And who else is more radiant, noble, body and soul, than our Queen?"

"Indeed. At the coronation, all named you Saint-Queen. To be betrothed is to safeguard the realm. Why hesitate? Would Tarlow not suffice?"

The Hierophant leaned forward.

The Queen's head throbbed again, pain lancing through her skull. She must not yield. She forced the words out:

"...I dreamed. A dream of the man sent by God to be my husband. He comes upon a swan-drawn ship, arriving with the stars. If he does not appear before summer—then I shall do as you say."

To be continued.

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