

SWAN FEATHERS

FADE IN:

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - NURSERY - NIGHT

CLOSE on a child's hands. Dark olive skin, as is the norm in this kingdom. The little hands knit white string in a circular pattern--four double-ended needles crossing each other. The fingers are slow and stumbling, the needles too big for a child's comfortable use. A few rows, clumsy but complete, of a little white sleeve extend below the crossed needles.

A drop of water lands on the fabric, darkening a spot. A tear. Another falls on the back of one of the struggling hands, slides off. We hear a sniff. The hands keep on knitting.

We PULL BACK to reveal the person behind the hands, a little girl sitting cross-legged on an ornate couch. She is ELISAVET (6). She is crying, but besides her breathing--sniffs, little gasps--she never makes a sound.

CUT TO:

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - NURSERY - NIGHT - TOP-DOWN VIEW

There are four groupings of people in the room, here seen from above: near the upper-left corner, a handmaiden and two toddlers. Along the left-hand wall, the couch Elisavet sits on with her handmaiden SOFIA. Though lit by lamps, the brightest light is from an open doorway, across from the couch. On the carpet at the center of the room lie two young boys and a chessboard. In a chair in the bottom-right corner, just out of the doorway's light, sits the SULTANA, holding a baby.

We hear an argument, echoing down an unseen hallway and into this room.

SULTAN (O.S.)

You assured me that you would have her speaking in a month.

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - NURSERY - NIGHT

We return to Elisavet, and the rest of the room slowly comes INTO VIEW. We see Sofia, knitting the body of a shirt. Her hands are faster, more adept at the task. Her brow is furrowed.

The TUTOR's voice is tiny by comparison to the Sultan's.

TUTOR (O.S.)

Forgive me, your majesty, but some students take longer than others. I need more time.

We see the handmaiden sitting on the floor in the corner, hard-pressed to keep the twin toddler princes, ESER and UGUR (3), from pulling each other's hair. Eser holds a little toy swan.

In the center of the room, ILKIN (9) and ALIM (7), the elder brothers, lie on their stomachs. Between them is a chessboard, mid-game. Ilkin's eyes are on the light from the doorway instead of the board.

YOUNG ALIM

Ilkin, it's your move.

YOUNG ILKIN

Shh! I'm listening.

SULTAN (O.S.)

More time? You have had time. And you are the fifth tutor I've hired.

We see the SULTANA in her shadowed armchair. In her arms is a baby, YANNI. She holds herself proud and tall in her seat. Her hair is covered by a silk headscarf. Her face, in this domestic moment, is unveiled--but betraying nothing. Her eyes rest on the opposite wall.

Ugur grabs at Eser's toy. Eser squeals in protest, bonks Ugur on the head with a tiny fist. The handmaiden quickly hushes them both, patting at their hands as a light scold.

CUT TO:

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - HALLWAY - NIGHT

We finally see the SULTAN. What an imposing presence he makes, a furious face on a tall, muscular torso. Before him, the TUTOR trembles. Behind him, IDRIS, the Sultan's advisor, observes.

TUTOR

Sultan Erhan, I assure you that I am an expert--

SULTAN

And I've had enough of you experts. Get out of my castle. Guards!

A pair of armored men step INTO FRAME. The tutor turns to face them, dismayed.

CUT TO:

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - NURSERY - NIGHT

We hear heavy footsteps, and muffled protests from the tutor. Ilkin turns to Alim, wide-eyed and grinning.

Elisavet's eyes squeeze shut. Her fingers stop their motions, but her hands overall tremble. Sofia's eyes flicker towards the princess. She puts on a smile, whispers.

SOFIA

How's that sleeve coming along, your highness?

Elisavet looks up at her. The lamplight glints in the tear streaks on her cheeks. She holds up her knitting. Sofia inspects it, tugs at a loose loop a couple rows down. Across the room, the Sultana watches the interaction.

SOFIA

You might want to fix that before you get too far ahead. But this is much better, your highness. Much better.

Elisavet nods. Takes a shaky breath. Brings the knitting closer to her chest again, and starts to pick at the string with her fingers, slowly undoing some of her work. Sofia returns to her own knitting, briefly making eye contact with the Sultana before respectfully bowing her head.

CUT TO:

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - HALLWAY - NIGHT

The Sultan strides down the hall, Idris hurrying to keep up.

IDRIS

A most unfortunate turn of events, sire. I will immediately begin the search for another tutor. Or perhaps another doctor will finally enlighten us?

SULTAN

No. No more bumbling doctors and useless tutors.
They cannot solve our problem.

IDRIS

Yes, yes, your majesty. It will be as you say.

They have reached the doorway to the nursery. Idris remains in the hallway as the Sultan enters.

CUT TO:

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - NURSERY - NIGHT

The Sultan stands in the doorway and surveys for a moment, scowling. His eyes fall on Elisavet. She does not look at him. His face softens, he sighs.

SULTAN

What a waste of money.

Elisavet does not look at him.

The Sultan walks over to the Sultana, leans in close. But his voice still carries across the room.

SULTAN

Melike... Might you reconsider having another child?

The Sultana's lips twitch into a little smirk.

SULTANA

What, are five sons not enough for you now?

SULTAN

They are, but... I know how much you wanted a daughter.

A needle slips from Elisavet's hand and clatters to the floor. She stares down at it. She doesn't dare do anything else.

The Sultana's smile wavers, but she maintains eye contact with her husband, keeps her voice level.

SULTANA

We have a daughter.

Alim moves a piece on the chessboard. His face lights up.

YOUNG ALIM

Checkmate!

Ilkin finally looks at the board.

YOUNG ILKIN

What? N-No! You cheated!

YOUNG ALIM

I did not!

YOUNG ILKIN

Yes you did, you must have!

The Sultan turns and walks towards the chess game.

SULTAN

What is all this commotion?

Ilkin sits up straight, indignant.

YOUNG ILKIN

Alim cheated, Father!

Tears well in Alim's eyes.

YOUNG ALIM

I didn't, I promise I didn't!

The Sultan sits on the floor near the boys, his brow furrowed in mock severity, trying to conceal his grin. The disappointment of before has slid entirely away, in place of pride in his sons.

SULTAN

We will get to the bottom of this crime. Show me the board, my sons! Chess has rules that must be followed.

Elisavet slides off the couch, bends over to pick up the needle.

SULTANA

Elisavet.

Elisavet looks up at the sound of her name. Makes eye contact with the Sultana.

SULTANA

Come here.

Elisavet glances at Sofia. Sofia gestures with her head--"go on, now." Elisavet sets her knitting and the loose needle on the couch and slowly crosses the room to her mother, rubbing at the tearstains on her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Finally she stands before the Sultana, tiny in her presence. The Sultana opens her mouth--but what could she say? She has no reassurances to offer. After a pause, she just sighs. In her arms, Yanni stirs, gurgles. The Sultana looks down at him.

SULTANA

You haven't spent much time with your new brother, now have you?

Elisavet shakes her head. The Sultana gently moves Yanni forward on her lap. Elisavet looks down at the baby, curious. Lifts a hand--hesitates. Looks to her mother for permission.

SULTANA

Go ahead. Be gentle.

Elisavet puts her right hand to Yanni's left. It's so tiny compared to hers. She marvels, her eyes wide.

CUT TO:

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - NURSERY - NIGHT - ELISAVET'S P.O.V.

Her fingers against Yanni's palm. He stirs--shift to his face. His eyes open. Squint at her. His fingers close around her fingers. Shift to his little fist, holding tightly to her digit.

CUT TO:

INT. MERICHEV CASTLE - NURSERY - NIGHT

Elisavet is love-struck. The Sultana smiles.

SULTANA

You see? Yanni is happy to meet his sister.

Elisavet looks at the Sultana, taps her own lips with a finger, and points at Yanni. The Sultana nods. Elisavet leans over and kisses Yanni on the forehead. He makes soft, content baby sounds.

SULTANA

You will be a good sister to him, won't you? To all of your brothers?

It's a tentative attempt at a connection. Elisavet nods eagerly, and goes back to studying Yanni's grip on her finger.

EXT. THE KINGDOM OF MERICHEV - NIGHT

We pull away, out a window that briefly frames Elisavet, Yanni, and the Sultana before we get too far up and away in the air to see them. We see MERICHEV CASTLE in its entirety--strong stone walls surrounding a decorated palace, a wide courtyard just within the wall's tall gates, empty. The moon and stars reflect in the water to the west, our left, illuminating the marshes forming the edge of a river delta.

MATCH DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE KINGDOM OF MERICHEV - DAY

The same view of the castle, but now the gates are wide open, and the courtyard filled with people.

Overlay: TWELVE YEARS LATER.

PAN DOWN to the river delta. The water lower on its shores than before, more rocks exposed. On a large rock sits an old woman: KISMET. A deep-wrinkled face with sharp eyes, shaded by her thick headscarf. Cross-legged, knitting. Surrounded by birds, rustling about and feeding: herons, ibises, teals, one large white SWAN. Kismet's needles are made of bone, circular-knitting pale green yarn.

She takes the yarn off the needles; it's a wide bracelet. She reaches into a fold of her dress, takes out a long black feather, wraps it around the knitted bracelet. Uses one of the needles to smooth the feather against the yarn, around the curve. The feather melts away into the fabric, leaving behind a black feather-shaped imprint. Kismet turns the bracelet over in her hands, studying her work, nodding approvingly at it.