

## Leda and the Swan (Sample)

“Our host is certainly generous, even if he has yet to show himself.”

Leah could see the irritated expression on her husband’s face even without turning around. She was standing at the balcony window, looking down at the lake below her, silvery and ethereal in the moonlight. Behind her, the party was in full swing. Leah knew she should be mingling with her husband’s friends and rivals, charming them and undermining them in equal measure. But tonight, she couldn’t play the part of the tech titan’s perfect wife.

“It’s been two days and he hasn’t shown himself!” Her husband complained loudly behind her to the group of financial backers gathered around him. “What kind of treatment is this? He invites forty industry leaders to Switzerland to pitch him on investing in our companies, and he hasn’t so much as said hello!”

Leah knew why her husband was upset. He was not used to being kept waiting. No one kept Tyson Armstrong, founder and CEO of Spartan Industries, waiting.

No one, apparently, except Sebastian Zarkadis: reclusive billionaire, renewable energy titan, inventor of the Ze.US technology that was said to produce the cheapest and cleanest electricity in the world, and their host this week at his private villa in the Swiss Alps. Sebastian Zarkadis, Leah guessed, could keep anyone he wanted waiting.

“I’m sure he’s very busy,” one of the other CEOs said.

“Or perhaps this is all an elaborate test,” another suggested.

“He is fond of tests,” another put in, fear lacing his voice. “Maybe he’s watching us right now...”

Leah rolled her eyes, glad that no one could see her from where she was standing by the windows. All these men were the same: spineless sycophants. When she’d worked in tech—before she’d married Tyson and gotten pregnant, before he’d asked her to stop working—she had eaten men like this for lunch. But now, as the stay-at-home wife and mother on her husband’s arm, she had to hold her tongue.

In fact, Leah had gotten so good at holding her tongue that she sometimes worried she’d lost her voice entirely. When was the last time she’d insisted on something? When was the last time she’d yelled? When was the last time she’d fought for what she wanted?

Take, for example, her request that Cleo and Carson accompany them to Switzerland. Leah had known she’d be bored at the retreat, and she’d hoped the twins could keep her company. But Tyson had refused point blank.

“This is my chance to finally convince Zarkadis to invest in Spartan,” he’d said, as if this were a difficult concept to understand. “I’m not bringing my *children*.”

“I’ve heard that Sebastian Zarkadis likes children,” she’d said weakly, but her husband had already turned away. The matter was closed. He’d spoken, and Leah had to obey.

Leah’s heart clenched at this memory, and she tried to push it away. She’d see her children soon enough. Just five more days, and then she’d be back home in Boston with them. Just five more days of parties like this, networking events, organized hikes in the mountains, boating excursions on the lake...

She sighed again as she looked out over the lake. As eager as she was to get back, she would miss these views: the still, silvery lake, surrounded by jagged, snow-capped peaks that sliced through the night. The mountains were stunning, but the sight of them also sent a shiver down Leah’s spine. There was something severe and unreachable about this place, just like there was something severe and unreachable about their absent host.

A ripple appeared in the water below, and Leah blinked. Something appeared to be moving on the lake. Where moments ago there had been nothing but a smooth surface, now, waves were beginning to extend toward the shore. She leaned forward, peering into the darkness.

And then she saw them: they appeared out of the darkness suddenly, their white feathers illuminated by the moonlight, glowing so brightly she wondered how she hadn’t noticed them earlier. Swans. A flock of white swans, gliding across the lake, their long, elegant necks tapering to razor-sharp beaks.

There were seven of them in total, and, at the front, were led by the most impressive creature Leah had ever seen. This swan was twice the size of all the others and moved with a swift, strong gracefulness across the water. He had a long, muscular neck, which Leah knew could snap her in half if it were to wrap around her, and his feathers were so brilliantly white he seemed to radiate his own light. As Leah watched, he rustled his wings, stretching them out as if he were going to take flight, and the span of them nearly took her breath away.

Leah’s lips parted. Her heart began to race. She had never seen such a beautiful creature, such power distilled in one animal.

He was the alpha, she knew instinctively. The leader. She wondered absurdly if he mated with all the females, if he got first rights to them.

“Tyson,” she said, turning and gesturing at her husband. “Tyson, come look at this.”

Her husband turned around at the sound of his voice, his eyebrows knitting together. He didn't like to be interrupted.

"What is it?" he snapped.

"There are swans down there," she said, pointing at the window. "Swans on the lake."

"Yes, Zarkadis keeps a flock of swans," he said impatiently. "What of it?"

"I've never actually seen swans before," she said, feeling herself blush as she spoke. The men gathered around her husband were all staring at her. Some looked amused, others sympathetic. She knew how she must appear to them: the simple, stupid trophy wife, still slender and beautiful at thirty-two, after giving birth to twins, in a tight, revealing gown, her long black hair perfectly coiffed. They thought Tyson had married her simply for her looks. What would they say if they knew she'd once hired him?

"Leah, I'm in the middle of something," Tyson said. "Why don't you get another drink?" He snapped his fingers at a passing waiter carrying a bottle of Dom Perignon. "Please refill my wife's champagne."

Leah thought she might die of embarrassment as the waiter refilled her glass, and she quickly turned back to the window to hide her shame. It didn't matter if her husband didn't care about the swans. She could still appreciate them.

But when she looked back at the water, the swans were gone. They'd vanished. Even the ripples were gone. The lake was once more as still as glass. Leah's hands began to tremble. Had she imagined them? But no, it wasn't possible...

She glanced again over her shoulder at her husband. He was engaged once more in conversation with the other CEOs and not paying any attention to her. She made up her mind in an instant.

She was going down to the lake. She was going to find the swans.