

You've Arrived! Welcome to Aarastad....



Image and "Converte Me Non" motto co. and t.m. 2019 Micah S. Harris

....and Your Exclusive Special Preview of --

PORTRAIT OF A SNOW QUEEN

by

Micah S. Harris (C. 2019)

Excerpted from the Beginning of Part One:

THE ICE PRINCESS REIGNS OVER A COURT OF TWO

(AND ONE OF THEM IS A BEAR)

The Meeting with Lord Melchior

“My goddaughter is convinced of what you will, no doubt, think but an extraordinary delusion: she is under an ancestral curse.”

““An ancestral curse?”” I said.

“Well, it’s first generation, rather freshly minted, but it *was* inflicted upon her according to birth. All ancestral curses must have a start *somewhere*, you know.”

The man to whom I was speaking was hoping to obtain my services as the tutor for his goddaughter the princess. He was well dressed in a frock coat, boots gleaming from a fresh blacking, and a shirt and pants tailored to fit his powerful, straight form.

His receding hairline was a widow’s peak, the hair at the temples graying. His forehead was high, and he possessed a full beard, which, like the hair atop his head, was so blond it was almost red.

I had noticed the tender skin beneath his eyes was remarkably puffy. Small wonder, I thought, if he regularly lost sleep. Serving as regent-guardian for the mentally disturbed future queen, one whom you could never be sure wouldn’t let the reins to the kingdom immediately slip from her hands once passed into them, was enough to take its toll on anyone.

We were sitting in the regent’s vast study in the summer palace of the small Scandinavian kingdom of Aarastad . The window was open, for it was an exceptionally warm morning on the fifteenth of June, 1844.

That day, the wind was blowing in from the coast. Usually, the breeze came off the nearby glacier and kept things pleasingly cool this far inland during the months of late spring and summer. That frozen mass, left over from the same eighteenth-century ice age that had almost wrecked the fourteen American colonies’ 1777 revolution, was actually responsible for Aarastad’s independence.

“My Lord Melchior,” I said, “I don’t believe in curses, ancestral or otherwise, so, yes, this notion of hers can be nothing but an aberrant obsession of the mind, and whatever else she suffers from it is purely psychosomatic, assuming there *is* a physical manifestation.”

“There are no physical manifestations, at least not as she believes there to be, but neither is her problem entirely psychological, Master Aurelanus. Her mind is held captive by another’s will, but this bondage of her psyche has its origin in a most definite physical event.”

“Lord Melchior, this ‘curse’ sounds all quite peculiar, and I understand why you felt the need to apprise me of it. However, I assure you that this belief of your ward is inconsequential in regard to the performance of my duties. Mathematics and grammar are the same whether one enters my classroom with a bane to call her own or not.”

“Master Aurelanus, while I appreciate your confidence in your abilities, you have yet to feel Freyja’s sting the first time. Nor do you realize how especially difficult she can be. She has managed to run off four tutors so far.”

“You call her ‘Freyja?’ I understood her name was ‘Yduna Ifguter.’ That is the name I have always heard the locals call their future queen.”

“‘Ifguter’ is her ancestral name as the Asger Queen which she will officially take when she ascends to the throne. Indeed, it is how she is already identified in any public bills. Her personal name, however, is Freyja Yduna Ifguter Edel Weiss.”

“Right. Edel...Weiss.”

“As her tutor, you may call her Freyja. You may call her Yduna. You may call her Princess Freyja or Lady Weiss. Anything *but* Edel Weiss. *That* would not go over well. And you most definitely want to get off on as right a foot as possible – heaven knows it’s going to be difficult enough –should you take this position, that is.”

“As I said, I stand ready and willing.”

“That is exactly what all your predecessors said. I do not wish to be pulled away from affairs of state for a sixth time to conduct yet another round of interviews. You already know more going in than the others have. In fact, I am about to reveal her circumstances in full, something I have not done before with any other applicant for the position. So, if you will....”

He nodded at the confidentiality document that lay alongside a pen protruding from its well on the desk between us.

“Oh,” I said, “of course.”

“Thank you,” Melchior said, as he examined my signature when I was done. He looked up at me. “Your middle name is ‘Kai?’ You do know that sounds like a girl’s name?”

“Yes, well, in my defense, in my native England, ‘Kay’ is masculine and was, in fact, the name of King Arthur’s foster brother. My middle name is actually ‘Gaius,’ from which the modern ‘Kay’ derived, and of which ‘K-a-i’ is a long-established variant.

“I suppose I should have written it ‘Ambrose Gaius Aurelanus,’ but ‘Kai,’ pronounced ‘*Ki*,’ as in ‘*Gaius*,’ has been the familiar diminutive I have been called by since I was a child. Perhaps I should have gone with ‘Gai’ and immediately removed all doubt concerning my masculinity.”

“Is ‘Kai’ legally binding?”

“It is.”

“Then I suppose I just need to know if you prefer me to address you by your first or your middle name.”

“‘Ambrose’ has been the name I have always gone by since venturing out into the world, my lord.”

“Good. So, Ambrose, the ink of your signature should be firmly dry by the time I have finished my tale. At which point, if you are still agreeable, I shall take you to Freyja’s private *hofgarten*, and introduce you to your potential tutee before we make it official.”

“My lord, really,” I said with a smile and a wave of my hand. “I do, of course, wish to meet her future royal highness immediately, but that isn’t necessary before we finalize the agreement.”

I was, you see, at this time a starving artist whose starving was disproportionate to the art he was producing. In fact, it was becoming counterproductive. I was eager, therefore, to secure a source of income both regular and reliable.

“No, trust me,” he said, “it’s necessary. There is nothing like an encounter with Freyja herself. Just hearing her story alone is insufficient to our securing the arrangement, and that, in itself, is rather extraordinary.

“If anywhere in my narrative this baggage appears too much for you to lift, raise your hand, and I will send for the next applicant. In such an event, you will please remember that the confidentiality agreement remains in full effect. What you are about to hear is tantamount to being privy to secrets of state. It goes with you, unspoken, to your grave.”

I smiled and nodded but sighed on the inside. I had to have this, I needed it desperately, and feared each moment spent finalizing things meant the offer would fall through. You see, among the patrons of the Arts in the kingdom of Aarastad, where I had hoped to pursue a career as a poet, my name was currently pronounced in the Latin as *Persona Non Grata*.

The Tale of the War of the Ice Maiden

“Now,” he was saying, “the princess’ curse came about thusly. About twenty years ago, the mountain people of our country were terrorized by an elemental entity known as the Ice Maiden. Freyja’s grandfather, King Ifguter, the one taking up the wall over there, led a war party to end this threat. They found the Ice Maiden and those she had taken captive beneath our mountains’ glacier....”

“*Beneath* the glacier?”

He gave me a flat look. “Are you having trouble with this already?”

“Well, I just thought maybe I missed something. I don’t understand how anyone could exist beneath a glacier, let alone how the search party could find ingress.”

“It was magic, Master Aurelanus. This is all very magical. And it is going to get very much more so. Are you incredulous so soon?”

I crossed my legs. “You are asking ‘if the footmen tire you, how shall you run with the horses?’ I am in for the marathon, I assure you. Pardon my interruption.”

“Pardoned. Now, under the glacier, at the foot of her throne, were gathered all her captives. These she claimed as making up her own kingdom of ice and frost, a dominion that was her due as the daughter of the Snow Queen.

“Naturally, the Ice Maiden was angered at this invasion which she immediately discerned meant her no good. She battered King Ifguter and his men with her icy breath, piled drifts in their path which rose as high as their chests.

“Ifguter still pushed through, his battle axe in his hand. She brought down hail upon them, some stones as large as boulders that split the skulls of many of the brave party.

“One of the Ice Maiden’s captives, a young man named Rudolph Weiss, was quite put out with her for having aborted his upcoming wedding. She had taken quite a fancy to him, you see, and with the illusion of his fiancé’s ring that he had lost, she lured him into a lake and captured him.

“As a *coup de grace*, she left his beloved with an image of him dead at the bottom of that lake. I suppose so that there would be no doubt in his fiancé’s mind about whether the wedding was truly off or not.”

“Rather thoughtful of her, actually,” I said.

He arched a reddish-blond eyebrow at me, and I immediately decided I might best henceforth keep to myself any such comments that would give him cause to believe I did not take him seriously. I could, after all, ill-afford to indulge my mirth at the cost of a job.

“Now,” he continued, “the Ice Maiden always kept her beloved Rudy close. Seeing that she was distracted by the on-coming threat, and that Ifguter was gaining the throne, Rudy leapt up, snapped an icicle from the Ice Maiden’s halo nimbus crown, and stabbed her deep into her neck. Immediately, she began to spew ice water from her wound.

“Overwrought with pain, as well as the revelation of just how much of a failure she had been in convincing the object of her affections to accept lowered expectations, she staggered from the throne and fell to her knees. This gave Ifguter the opening to swing his axe and behead her.

“He snatched up the head and led the others from beneath the glacier. No longer sustained by elemental magic, the ice was now beginning to fall down upon them like a shattering ceiling of glass. Not all survived their attempt to escape, but Rudolph did, as, of course, did Ifguter.

“Ifguter displayed the head of the Ice Maiden to assure the mountain people that she was indeed no longer a threat. Meanwhile, Rudy found that his former bride-to-be had decided that, after all, life goes on, for her if not him. He had been gone over ten years without realizing it, not aging a day, and he returned to find her a decade older and six little children clinging to her.

“Ifguter found a distraught Rudy on the ground, huddled around the head of the Ice Maiden which the locals were keeping in a subterranean cave where the temperature was a steady thirty degrees.

“In his distress and disappointment over his fiancé, Rudy was verbally ruminating that perhaps the Ice Maiden had been his one true love after all, that she had certainly been more dedicated to him than his faithless fiancée.

Ifguter advised him that all this remorseful wailing about over the severed head of an avowed enemy of mankind was perhaps not the best way to be carrying on.

“‘I have a daughter,’ Ifguter said, ‘and well aware am I of the debt I owe you in defeating the Ice Maiden. If my Isolde suits you, then you can have her.’

“She did, and thus Rudy married the Princess Isolde Ifguter. He became Prince Rudolph Weiss, adopted son of the House of Asger, and brother-in-law, and, eventually, close friend and confidante to Prince Cai, who became King Caius at Ifguter’s death.”

“Rudolph died alongside his friend King Caius, didn’t he?” I asked.

“Yes, both men along with their wives and Cai and Gerda’s little boy. On the glacier. The king and queen left no other issue. Cai’s sister Isolde’s union with Rudolph, however, turned out much more fruitfully.

“Thus has Freyja, niece of the rightful king of Aarastad, granddaughter of Ifguter himself, and true daughter of the house of Asger, come to succeed to the throne of Aarastad. Isolde and Rudolph also produced a sibling, a younger sister named Asa.”

“Shall I be tutoring her as well?”

“No. Princess Asa is receiving her education in the capital’s palace, where she has lived apart from her sister for many years. The reason for this separation lays in the same event that resulted in her sister’s possession, the account of which I shall return to now.

“Preserving the Ice Maiden’s head instead of allowing it to melt was not the best of ideas. The village boasted of its prize. Pilgrimages were made. Word began to spread. Carried by the north wind, the story reached the farthestmost island in the Spitzbergen archipelago where the Ice Maiden’s mother, the Snow Queen, ruled in her ice castle.”

“The ‘Snow Queen’ was notified in *Spitzbergen*...by the *north wind*?” I said.

He looked at me. “Yes. Receiving notification in the post wasn’t exactly an option, now was it? She blew down straightway in a gale, bringing a blizzard in late spring upon our mountains.

“There she recovered her daughter’s severed head. In retaliation, she slaughtered the village’s people, but not before learning who was responsible for her demise.

“And then the Snow Queen headed straight for this very palace....”

Reflections in the Snow Queen’s Glass

“Now,” Lord Melchior said, producing a small key which he turned in a lock in the desk’s drawer. “I am going to read the account of what happened next in the words of my friend, Prince Rudolph himself, from a diary entry dated July 21, 1839.”

He took out an envelope and removed some browning papers from of it, which he proceeded to unfold. Holding the pages at half an arm’s length, he began:

Much time had passed since I had last felt the chilling embrace of the Ice Princess (whom others call ‘Maiden’ but I know she was not so!) and my hope was that the warm ones of my beautiful young wife, which she rejoiced to administer and I rejoiced to receive, would one day put those of that witch out of my memory entirely.

Indeed, the intervening years by far had been happy ones. My daughter Freyja was now almost three years old, and soon my darling Isolde and I would have a sibling for her.

I remember that night that would change my young family’s life forever was an unusually freezing one for the spring. We had seen the snow on the mountain, and odd it was. We knew the wind was blowing down to us from off it.

This unseasonable snow brought back memories of my captivity, and the icy caresses I had been forced to endure. Ifguter’s recent death less than a year before left me feeling especially vulnerable, yes, for myself, I admit, but I feared far more that I would be unable to protect my wife and child if that insanely jealous creature had found a way to reincorporate herself.

But, I assured myself, certainly this unseasonal snow is only some freak occurrence. I had handled the Ice Princess’s severed head myself. She had not been human, but that did not

make her immortal or supernatural— only ‘other natural,’ an elemental. And she was long dead. Thus, I did not speak of my fears and unsettle my wife and daughter.

That night, we awoke first to Freyja’s nurse’s scream and then Freyja’s. I sat up in bed, all my fears immediately recalled upon awaking. We found the nurse collapsed on the floor, and Freyja squalling uncontrollably.

Our daughter was unhurt; we thought at first that she was only upset from the nurse’s scream. At least, we hoped she had not seen what the nurse claimed she had: a tall pale woman with long white hair whose clothing tinkled when she moved like sleet against a window pane. Her white sparkling gown fell to her feet shod in silver slippers, and a cloak of pale blue draped her shoulders, reaching to the floor and forming her train.

But it was the crown she was said to wear that made me fear the most. For a while I feared the Ice Princess had reincorporated. But as I pressed the nurse for more description of whom she had seen, it became clear that this was a different entity, though her intentions for our daughter were no less frightening.

I saw her bend over the child in her bed,’ her nurse said. “She kissed her lips, and then a toe, and then an ankle. Then she smiled and ran her hand over Freyja’s forehead and her blond hair. The little girl shivered and pulled the covers up about her in her sleep.’ Then the nurse told us the terrible doom this creature had pronounced over our little girl:

A daughter for a daughter and the Snow Queen will be avenged.’ That was when the nurse, who until now had stood by stunned by this eldritch vision, screamed and collapsed. The Snow Queen brushed by her on her way out, leaving a trail of glittering frost behind, and the nurse some blackened fingers from the brush of her train.

We searched the castle, but the frost trail did not remain long behind its source and had melted before we could overtake the creature who had left it.

Thereafter we were on guard for the Snow Queen’s return. Hot coals were kept burning on the window sills and at the entrance of each castle door throughout the days and nights until the unusual cold snap had passed, and we watched the mountain for signs of any other unseasonal freezes.

They never came, and neither did she. Still, I never let drop my vigilance, especially when winter arrived. I did not lax my guard until that day of great familial happiness – which became the last such that I would ever know....

On Freyja’s seventh birthday, she received a large package. I unwrapped it and found it contained a looking glass in an ornate metal frame. My heart was heavy with love for my eldest daughter that day, and our new addition was darting about our feet to my joy, and, overwhelmed

by this bliss, I smiled into the mirror – and saw the most hideous leer on my features reflected back at me.

Clearly, the Snow Queen was behind this vile present and had hoped that Freyja would open the gift and look into the glass. But to what end? The Snow Queen surely would gain no great revenge from simply frightening the girl. I would learn all too soon what was her scheme.

For Freyja had come behind me and was already staring into the mirror. And who she saw staring back at her – yes, I saw too – was the Snow Queen! Freyja had seen the face of the woman leaning over her in her bed, and now it was Freyja's own.

From that moment on, my daughter was changed. The Snow Queen personality dominates her own to this day with no sign of abeyance, despite all of my and her mother's efforts.

My immediate reaction had been swift. I fetched Ifguter's axe that had severed the head of this foul creature's daughter.

I swung it at that awful face in that glass that transfixed my daughter, shattering the mirror and sending a tiny shard to lodge in Freyja's eye – and an eye of her sister, whom her mother, at my order, had been holding back.

Both splinters still retained the Snow Queen's reflection, and, thus, my own hand insured that neither Freyja herself nor her sister would ever see my oldest daughter again as anything but the Snow Queen.

“But it isn't in her eye; it is in her *mind*,” I said to Melchior as he returned the paper to the envelope, then locked it again inside the drawer. “Since they were convinced otherwise, though, did her parents try to remove the glass – from both girls' eyes?”

“No, they dared not. The specks were so tiny that any attempt to extract them would inevitably have run the risk of their daughters being blinded in their penetrated eyes. On the other hand, it quickly became apparent that the girls' vision was never in any danger from the imbedded splinters themselves – their *natural* vision, that is.

“Neither father nor mother would thus chance mutilating their girls and condemning either to wearing a patch over an empty socket for the rest of her life. Also, it was questionable as to how effective removing the glass would have been.”

“What do you mean?”

“Asa, who never actually looked in the mirror but caught a speck of it, has a fragment of the mirror with the same image of the Snow Queen, yet she does not believe herself to be this elemental. However, through that piece of glass she sees her sister as this creature...and *fears* her.

“Asa was so traumatized by Freyja’s seeming transformation that the two had to begin occupying separate palaces, Freyja here and Asa at Elfarborg. But Asa has never seen herself as a rival Snow Queen.

“And though Rudolph’s reflection was distorted by the glass, he remained himself. He did not become ‘the Snow King.’ He could also see, alongside his own altered image, the reflected visage of the Snow Queen which belonged to Freyja alone.

“Recall that Rudolph said Freyja’s personality changed the moment she saw the Snow Queen’s face as her own in the mirror. Clearly, this particular enchantment was meant for *her*, just as that elemental witch had promised over her bed.

I sighed and shifted my weight on my backless stool. “Other than Asa being so afraid of her sister that the two must live in separate palaces on opposite sides of the kingdom, what have been the other long-term effect of Freyja’s belief that she is this ‘Snow Queen?’”

He sighed. “She is now convinced that she is no longer human but a sentient elemental force encased in a thin veneer of flesh and blood – barely contained. She believes she is essentially a living storm of hail and snow that throbs against her skin to get out. And she has no use for ‘mere mortals’ whom she considers a separate and inferior kind to her own.

“More, the Snow Queen’s delusion is so strong upon her that Freyja believes the rules that bind an elemental being now bind her.”

“How so?”

“As you would expect, the royal family availed themselves of the scholars and libraries of the greatest universities on the continent to learn the nature of these elementals in hope of finding a cure for Freyja.

“The species represented by the Snow Queen and her daughter the Ice Maiden, as it turns out, are said to be extremely vulnerable to the kisses or caresses of the merest of ‘mere mortals’ if these are administered in love.

“More than one but no fewer than three such affectionate touches would suffice to burden the elemental with a human soul with all its natural desires and yearnings.”

“She would fall in love....”

“Love for a man, love for a child....it doesn’t matter what the variety as long as it is human. In that terrible moment, the shell of her body would burst beyond reclaiming as her pure elemental self was unleashed. For the unfortunate human involved, it would be rather like being struck full force by an arctic gale.

“In Freyja’s mind, her fate would be far worse: her disembodied consciousness would be carried off beyond her control, to be blown about over the surface of the earth amidst the planet’s snow and hail as long as the world stands.

“This, she is convinced, would be her final state until the elements themselves pass away: to always feel with full poignancy her humanity, but, now bodiless, to also be sundered absolutely and irrevocably from even the possibility of meaningful companionship with mankind.

“Thus, a Snow Queen or Ice Maiden, as Freyja believes herself to be, resists most violently the touch of any human tenderness or passion.”

He stared at me through narrowed eyes.

“Yes?” I said.

His gaze shifted down to the table, where the signed document of confidentiality lay. My eyes followed his own and then I looked back up to meet his stare.

“The ink is now dry, Master Aurelanus.”

“I understand.”

“Good. As continuation of the royal line is paramount, you can appreciate how much more complicated this aspect of her bewitched psyche makes the prospects of pairing Freyja off with a proper husband.”

“But you said the Ice Maiden was so smitten with Freyja’s father Rudolph that her desire drove her to kidnapping and even falsifying his death to possess him. I scarcely believe she kept her hands to herself after all that effort. Why was she not destroyed until Ifguter relieved her of her head?”

“Her actions were motivated by lust and obsession and completely one-sided,” he said. “Besides, it is the loving touch of the *mortal* that is fatal. If Rudy ever caressed her, it was out of coercion. That doesn’t count.”

I gave my head a shake. “Look. The metaphysics of faerie land are all beside the point. Freyja is as human as either of us. Her existence as an elemental is only in her mind.”

“Freyja’s mind, Master Aurelanus, and perhaps her soul, has been possessed by a *true* entity of ice and snow. So, though Freyja has no actual magical existence as the Snow Queen, nor exists in any true danger of a violent disembodiment by a loving touch, ‘all only in her mind’ doesn’t quite get it.

“Do you grasp how insidious, how cunning was the Snow Queen’s plan in kissing Freyja *three* times as a babe? How she bound her to her? Freyja will now not even allow the first human kiss, thus leaving those frosty lips of the Snow Queen imprinted upon her perhaps forever.

“There is, however, this much,” he said after a moment, “Though she believes herself to have been transposed into another category of existence, the knowledge of her human history was not jettisoned in the transition.

“Therefore, her parents never ceased hoping until the day of their deaths that the real Freyja, though subjugated, is still present; that a very human heart still beats under all the ice, and may still be able, with significant motivation, to turn its own fate.

“Now, Master Aurelanus, my story is done. Other than to say that Freyja is now a seventeen-and-a-half-year-old young lady in need of an education. She is heir to the throne, my most sacred trust from my most beloved of friends, and I wish her to have a liberal learning, which, I understand from your recommendation, that you are able to supply from various and sundry disciplines.

“But, after hearing all this, are you still willing?”

By this point, I had to question Lord Melchior’s own sanity a bit. Yet, the man who had interviewed me was perfectly lucid and in clear command of his faculties. He *had* been successfully managing a kingdom for going on four years now.

I shrugged. What if he and his goddaughter *were* both insane? The reality was that I was nigh being put out on the streets from my present rooms. So, as long as the man could access the royal coffers....

Desperation aside, if there was going to be a time for any negotiation, this was it.

“The pay is very good,” I said, scratching my brownish-blond bearded jaw. “Lodging?”

“Here in the summer palace where Freyja is in residence the year ‘round.”

“Winters come early in these parts. Could I trouble you for a room with a fire place?”

“That is no trouble.”

“And a window for daylight, and a good supply of tallow candles?”

“What man...are you afraid of the dark?”

“I like to read. A lot. Eyestrain is a professional hazard.”

“Oh, of course. There will be no problem in that regard.”

“Very well, then. I am in.”

“There is one more thing, Master Aurelanus....”

“Please. Call me Ambrose.”

“Freyja is very beautiful, and she is on the cusp of full womanhood. And you are not nearly so much her senior as I would prefer. Nor do you have a wife, as I’d rather, with a houseful of little people who know you by the endearing sobriquet of ‘papa.’ You know that to touch her is not to die, so you may be tempted.”

I waved him off. “No need to concern yourself there, my lord. I pride myself on maintaining the highest standards of professionalism, and, as you have described her as essentially emotionally unstable and mentally unbalanced, I can most assuredly say that she is definitely *not* my type. Not at *all*, sir.”

He frowned at me, but extended his hand anyway. “In station as well, schoolmaster. Do not forget your ‘type’ there as well.”

We shook hands. And I was on my way to becoming the Snow Queen’s tutor.

I just had to survive meeting her.

And every day afterward.

The Polar Bear and the Pict

So, there you have, above, in brief, the environs and the mysterious history of where the Princess Freyja Yduna Ifguter Edel Weiss lived in her...condition... the entire year ‘round.

She did not live in total seclusion. Hardly. The palace was fully staffed, and Lord Melchior was there on regular occasions throughout the year. Freyja was, in fact, often seen about. But usually alone in the margins. And, whenever she had to endure closer company, she always maintained a generous space apart and kept her mien distant.

“You know,” Melchior said as we climbed the broad, outer stone staircase that ran alongside one of the walls of the chalet, “I’ve heard of you....”

“You have?”

“Yes. All the more reason to hope this works out. You are a man of letters, I understand?”

“I am.”

“It would look rather good on Freyja’s royal resume to have studied under such a tutor. You’ve done some poetry, haven’t you?”

“Why, yes. Yes, I have.”

“Refresh me.”

“*Upon a Fjord, Dying Young.*”

He snapped his fingers. “That was it. Something about a heroic goat, wasn’t it?”

I felt my ears burn. “No. There was a heroic dog named *Jöt*, but he is strictly supporting cast.”

Before I could correct him further regarding the content of my poem and advise him more of *Jöt* in context, my attention was diverted by something else, just as we stepped off the top of the stairs, past the guard, and onto the vast terrace that supported the princess’s private retreat.

Her *hofgarten* was effectively a courtyard whose walls enclosed beautiful trees and flowers. At the top of the stairs we were immediately met by the first of several signs on a picket style post. Its message was not one of minced words:

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING *FOLKVANGR*

NO FOLK WELCOME HERE!

SO YOU GO AWAY.

BEWARE OF THE TROLL!

(HE WILL EAT YOU)

Melchior looked at me, rolled his shoulders and made a slight grimace.

“There are *no* carnivorous trolls here,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said flatly. “She almost had me going there with that one for a minute.”

Stretched along the garden path of flat stones at measured intervals were posted further warnings as we went along:

FOLKVANGR IS THE EXCLUSIVE HOFGARTEN OF THE SNOW QUEEN, SHE OF THE *AEISIR*,

FREYJA YDUNA IFGUTER LEONTOPODIUM ALPINUM

(EMPHASIS ON THE FIRST SYLLABLE, SOUNDS LIKE:

“GO AWAY!”)

Melchior sighed and shook his head, embarrassed, I suppose for not having thought to have the signs removed before bringing me here. “It would appear Freyja is not receiving today.”

I pointed at the sign. “ ‘Freyja Yduna Ifguter *Leontopodium Alpinum*?’ What’s with the Latin? I thought you said her name was ‘Edel Weiss.’”

“I also said that she is loath to own those elements of her name that sound like ‘edelweiss,’ and forbids anyone to address her with what she considers a most unfortunate conjunction of *nomenclatura* that no living being should be forced to endure.

“It could be worse. I knew a girl whose parents named her ‘Ima Jewel.’ But we all called her ‘Youra Jewel.’ Kids, you know.”

“Yes, well, Freyja is made of stern stuff but of her name she is not amused. However, she knows she is stuck with ‘Edel Weiss’ until she takes the ancestral name of Asger Queen at her coronation.” He pointed at the writing in Latin on the sign.

“*That* is the scientific classification of the Alpine flower popularly known as ‘edelweiss’, and so that is how she gets around it for the nonce.”

There was another eye-catching string of barbed *bon mots* which she had been certain to include as a postscript on this particular sign positioned so near the entrance:

SPECIAL NOTE TO ALL PROSPECTIVE SUITORS:

GO PARK YOUR BAROUCHE OUTSIDE SOMEONE ELSE’S CASTLE

“No lovesick swains here,” I said.

“Nor would they long remain so, if they were so inclined, once actually encountering the object of their disaffection,” Melchior added.

We rounded a tall, manicured hedge, and I found myself greeted by the sight of a large polar bear possessed of very big paws, resting his massive form on his back to warm his stomach by the sun.

I took a step back. “You said there was nothing carnivorous here!” I said.

“I said there were no carnivorous *trolls* here.”

“And you forgot to mention the polar bears?!”

“Just the one.”

“That’s plenty! Look, I’m not particular about exactly *what* wants to eat me! My policy is an overall ‘avoid being eaten!’”

He waved me off, even as the bear, attracted by our noise, inclined his head toward us over his protruding, well-fed belly. With a loud grunt, he began to get to his feet.

“Oh, Theoden doesn’t eat people,” Melchior said. “At least, not anymore. At his advanced age, his teeth are all but nubs, and his testosterone has dipped to non-existent levels. Ah, here he comes.”

“I can *see* that,” I said. With an extreme exertion of the will, I kept my feet planted, but my knees were trembling.

“He just wants to make friends.”

I watched the beast’s casual approach, its stride creating a lazy shifting back and forth of his shaggy white mane that was yellowing in patches.

“So, his name is ‘Theoden?’”

“But he goes by the diminutive of ‘Ted.’”

I looked at Melchior. “You’re kidding.”

Before he could respond, the bear arrived at my side. With another low groan, he sniffed my hand, brushing it with the moist, black semi-globe of a nose. Then he began to slaver my hand with his tongue, which was of a tepid warmth. He looked up at me, blinked his dark eyes, rumbled out a ‘harumph,’ then, apparently satisfied, turned to return to his sunning.

“You see, it’s not the polar bear you should be worried about. He’s easy. You have yet to encounter the true terror, which is, uhm...” he pointed toward the latest sign in our path.

GO AWAY – I (FROST) BITE!

We continued then to proceed along the flagstone trail, despite the repeated discouragements posted along it:

IF YOU HAVE PROCEDED THIS FAR, YOU HAVE OBVIOUSLY NOT RECEIVED MY POINT.

I REPEAT:

NO ONE WANTS YOU HERE

THAT MEANS ME.

IF YOU COME ANY FARTHER...

...YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO ACCEPT ME THE WAY I AM!

I pointed at the last sign. "How long ago did she put all this moody pubescent girl stuff up?" I asked. "When she was twelve?" My fingertip brushed the sign, I immediately withdrew it, looked at my fingertip, then back at Lord Melchior.

"This paint is wet," I said.

Melchior didn't answer, but with a roll of his eyes, he directed that I should follow him around a large gray alder tree.

And there, ahead of us, was her future royal majesty, Lady Freyja Yduna Ifguter *Leontopodium Alpinum*.

Or, as she had been christened, Freyja Yduna Ifguter Edel Weiss.

This was how I first saw her at a distance: seated erect on a stone bench near a tall apple tree laden with those small, hard apples of the Norwegian variety. An apron gathered at the lap girdled her gown. From this apron, she parred pieces of fruit which she both delicately munched herself, lips pressed closed, and tossed to the pigeons milling about at her feet.

The birds regularly fouled the nearby statue of King Ifguter, the source of all her troubles, which, I suppose, is why she liked having them around.

At the sound of our approach, she laid aside her paring knife and rose to her full height, her perfect posture making her feel taller than her five feet and four inches.

She was covered from the neck down. Most women were in those days, of course, but then, as now, a young woman might lower her décolletage varyingly according to the occasion, or wear short sleeves, or show off creamy hands and slender, bejeweled fingers with polished, aesthetically trimmed nails.

Not Lady Freyja. Not only was she covered head to toe in this warm weather, her extremities were well encased. She wore falconer gloves (because they did not make pigeon gloves, I suppose), sleeves tucked in. Her hair, a crown of braids, was under a hood. The raised hair showed off a slender neck, though nothing in Princess Freyja's appearance came from calculated vanity.

Her skin was incredibly white, but not in a manner that suggested she was sickly and feeble. To the contrary, a glacier's imperviousness radiated from it that would have seemed incommensurate with her slim frame and delicate features, except for the strength implied in how she held herself.

Her gown of muted earth colors fit her perfectly, so that I could tell at a distance that her figure, though slender, possessed such rondure that perhaps it was a good thing that she kept

herself at a distance as far as men were concerned. Or an unspeakable tragedy, depending on your point of view.

She made no move to meet us. As we neared, I could see her regarding us with gray eyes above high cheek bones.

She certainly owned the regal persona that was hers by birth and found it, no doubt, useful in keeping people never closer than an arm's length.

As we neared, I could see that, despite the overall marble whiteness of her flesh, her lips were full and red, and there was blush in her cheeks. Otherwise, she could have passed for a statue alongside Grandfather Ifguter, she was so perfectly still...except for her gray eyes that moved up and down me in a way that told me I was already dismissed before I had even begun.

In total, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and, simultaneously, the most off-putting haughty creature as well.

A sudden, violent rustling of the limbs in the apple tree ensued, sending down a shower of green leaves and twigs along with those little, hard apples pelting the ground.

That was when I noticed the wild man with long, braided red hair in the tree, seated in the V where two branches came together. His brown body was painted with concentric circles of blue and other odd symbols, and he wore nothing but a loin cloth. His spear was leaning against the tree trunk.

"So...why is there a Pict in that tree?" I asked.

"Oh? You've seen one before?"

"A few, actually. I've been to one of the handful of reservations on the Orkney Islands. The ones there have been assimilated culturally...some. They like to wear top hats and tails over kilts. The English tongue has been forced on them for a century. None of the Picts today can read what few things their ancestors left carved in the standing stones."

Melchior nodded toward the savage in the tree. "Thule there blew in from the sea on a barge one day, years ago. Do not be deceived. He has his own top hat and tails in his closet. He was extremely fond of her aunt the queen, you see, and now he has put himself in the role of protector of her niece, the throne's heir apparent."

"Is his protectiveness of the princess going to be a problem?"

"As long as you don't physically threaten Freyja, I suppose not. You'll soon forget that he is even there. Like a cat, he just becomes a domestic fixture after a while."

“Hmmm...,” I said. “I can see from here she is already not happy to see me. I’d say even borderline belligerent.”

“That is a fair estimation.”

“Um-hmm. Were you serious about not wishing to waste more time in seeking a new tutor?”

“Certainly.”

“Then play along with me; take nothing I say seriously.”

He looked at me. “What is your plan?”

“Show her that I can be ‘belligerent’ as well.”

The Princess Freyja Yduna Ifguter Edel Weiss

We were now almost within earshot of the girl.

“Go ahead then. Take your best shot across the bow,” Melchior said. “Frankly, at this point, I am desperate. She will certainly show you no mercy; perhaps it is far past time someone respond in kind.”

He cleared his throat.

“Freyja,” said Lord Melchior as we came to a stop before her, “This is your new tutor, Master Ambrose Gaius Aurleanus.”

I bowed. Her eyes continued to be the only thing on her that moved as she again looked me up and down. Then she sniffed and raised her chin.

“You mean the new fool,” she said.

“Charmed,” I said.

“Freyja!” Melchior said.

“No, it’s all right, my lord.”

I looked Freyja in the pale gray eye.

“I am new to court, my lady, so I admit I may need some help understanding manners here. Please to clarify: am I on the receiving end of your rather banal efforts at being rude, or are you so dull that what you were supposed to have learned at charm school was beyond your comprehension?”

Her gray eyes flashed like thunder cloud, her blush spread, but she did not lose her dignified posture. “You dare speak to me this way?” she said.

“It’s a necessary question, my lady. I need to know what I am up against. That is, has your ability to comprehend been compromised by the tendency to inbreed among royal families, resulting in your becoming a hopeless mental degenerate?”

Her mouth gaped, she shook her head at me, scowled, and turned to Melchior. “Do you just stand there and say nothing in defense of my honor? Of the *entire* royal family’s honor?”

He shrugged. “It happens.”

“Yes, my lady. Just tell me: are you so hopelessly stupid by nature that you will be a waste of my time?”

Now she was completely red. “Do you know with whom you speak, mortal? I am the Snow Queen, a force of nature!”

Melchior slapped his forehead and looked away. “Here we go....,” he moaned.

“What you are, your opulence,” I said, “is a seventeen-year old girl in need of an education, some manners, and probably an overdue good spanking.”

Her eyes widened as they moved over me once more, this time not with contempt but utter incredulity. “Oh? And are you the one to administer it?”

“You’re going too far, school master,” Melchior intoned gravely to me in a low voice.

I turned my back to Freyja and faced Melchior alone. “Do you want someone to teach her or not?” I said, lowering my own tone. “Whether it’s me or someone else, this brat has to first learn respect for her instructor if she is ever going to learn anything else, so *you* decide.”

Melchior raised his voice: “I am *not* giving you permission to put your common hand to the royal posterior destined to take its seat over all the realm!” he said.

Now it was Lord Melchior’s turn to make Freyja bristle. “Permission from *you*?” she said. “In regard to my *person*? Now you forget *yourself*.”

As I turned back toward her, I remember thinking *that* was a rather irreverent way to address her regent godfather. She was, after all, still legally a child dependent on him, but perhaps she no longer recognized him as an authoritative figure in her life, having becoming other than human in her own mind

I took a few steps away from the two of them and ostentatiously looked Freyja up and down in a detached, analytical manner. Then I shrugged and said to Melchior, “It’s probably too late for that anyway.”

I did not notice that those few steps put me directly under the apple tree. Princess Freyja did, however. She raised her apron with both hands, held it out, looked up into the tree, shouted “Thule!” and shook the apron emphatically as, with a smirk on her face, she looked right into mine...

At which point the Pict gave those branches a vigorous shaking, and I immediately was pelted by a hail of Norwegian apples, which, as I have mentioned, were *hard*.

As I darted out from under that tree, Lord Melchior shouted at his ward: “*Freyja Yduna!*”

Brushing what residue of leaves and twigs were on my coat – I did not give her the satisfaction of acknowledging the refuse that still hung humiliatingly in my hair – I stepped right up to her, my blue eyes fixed on hers, gray as the slate of a snowy sky.

“I see my lady prefers her apples as her neighbors the Norwegians say: ‘high on the tree and sour’...which I find an apt description of my lady *herself*.”

She addressed Melchior but did not turn from mine those eyes that were now hard and sharp as ice shards. “Did you not explain to this fool exactly the nature of whom, and *what*, he is dealing?”

“He did,” I said, “but it was so ridiculous, I didn’t think it was worth retaining.”

“I *am* the Snow Queen,” she said. “I am no longer human but have become an elemental being, and *this* vestigial flesh and blood is but a mere covering.”

The flush had receded from her face and that white complexion made her every word feel cold and from somewhere remote. For a moment, I could almost believe her claim.

Then I saw a glint in her eye and recalled Melchior’s story of that speck of cursed mirror that had gotten in there, that still held the reflection of the Snow Queen. Was I seeing that image now? Freyja as she saw herself?

“Would you, little man, seek to dance with the whirlwind? Would you gaze directly into the sun’s face like it was your lover’s and think it worth your time? Lay hold on me, and you take hold of a tempest of hail stones and thunder, arctic blasts that buffet so that they will flay your skin, a cold so cold that it burns, and burns enough to leave you black where you stand.

“One flick of my wrist, and when I am through with you, you would look like you had been exposed to the frozen elements for days though it would be over in moments. *You* would be over in moments. Do you still find me ridiculous? Place your ‘disciplining’ hand on me, and you will quickly find me otherwise!”

I stared at her. “No,” I said after a moment, my voice soft. “I find you very, very sad, my lady. And broken. Whatever *really* happened to you, Freyja Weiss? Whatever it was, it should

not have happened to anyone. You didn't deserve it; you were just an innocent child who had your whole world snatched away from you in a moment.

"I must admit, seeing you like this...I don't know where to begin."

"That is well, because you are already done. You, sir," Lord Melchior said, "are outrageous! I was willing to go along with your brazenness to a point, but then you not only had the audacity to vocally acknowledge that she *has* a back side, but suggested you might --."

He squinted his eyes tightly and gave his head a violent, little shake. "Next," he said, "you will be announcing to the world that the queen heir apparent has legs under her skirt! You will *not* do, sir. And I was so hopeful...."

He slowly shook his head his head at me. "Go. You are dismissed."

"I am not in the habit of staying where I am not wanted, my lord," I said, "But...", and I turned to the girl. "Princess Freyja?"

She arched her pale eyebrows and regarded me with clinched lips, but with the corners of her mouth turned up, together forming a mockingly sweet smile. Clearly, she was savoring her latest triumph in dispensing yet another tutor.

"I want you to know," I said, "that I never seriously intended to lay either hand or rod on you. Your reputation proceeds you, my lady, and I simply wished it clear that I would not allow you to continue to get away with your audaciously rude behavior by responding audaciously rude in kind.

"Striking back with my words, yes; striking you *physically* with my hand to subdue you – never. No, my lady, *I* would have never hit *you*, not even with the most *mellow* of fruit."

At these words, she actually tucked her head, if slightly, and averted her eyes from mine, blush staining her cheeks.

"In fact," I continued, "I applaud the self-possession of your person that you made clear to Lord Melchior when he presumed he decided who or who will not touch your body at this stage of your maturity."

Her head immediately lifted and her eyes met mine again. She searched them intently, as though she had suddenly been alerted to my presence for the first time and was eagerly engaged in trying to genuinely sort out some real estimation of me at the last minute.

"I sincerely hope you shall continue to maintain this principle," I continued, "when the regent and the rest begin to pressure you to marry some prince they've selected, and begin to push you to take on the role of the royal brood mare. I don't know you, Freyja Yduna Ifguter *Leontopodium Alpinum*, but I know that you deserve a far better life than *that*."

I turned and began my walk back across the terrace garden. The moment I was on the other side of the gray spruce and out of their sight, I quickly brushed the residual leaves and twigs from my head.

I know I had to have looked a fool to both of their royal highnesses, filled to their eyeballs with their overinflated senses of self-importance, as I continued to stand there, my attempts at matching Freyja's austerity undercut by the trash tangled in my hair.

I sighed. Now it was back to my attempts to survive by writing poetry. Ah, well...one could do without the luxury of eating daily or having a roof over one's head, I supposed.

Locked in my own self-pitying reflections, I was not initially aware of the shouting behind me. When I did hear it, I figured Freyja and her godfather were having it out, each displeased with the other's performance that day. Good. At least they were not sharing a good laugh at my expense.

As I neared the stairway, something flew over my head. I looked up to see a pigeon. Probably, I thought, one of those I had seen Freyja feeding earlier.

I was just reaching the ground when I saw two guards running my way.

From above me, I heard the guard on duty atop the terrace shout: "Hold that man!"

A lead weight sank in my stomach as men in hauberks, helmets, and chainmail intercepted me and crossed their staves, staring blankly ahead like soulless automatons. No use appealing to these gentlemen's sense of outrage at an abuse of power to perpetuate an injustice.

Apparently, I had not taken fully into account the potential consequences of offending royalty. I had been emboldened by having Melchior's support, but had, perhaps, overplayed my hand. Now I stood to be imprisoned by him and his insane goddaughter in the palace dungeon.

I looked at the guards who blocked my way, then shrugged. "Winter is coming. Why not just go with it?" I thought.

"Hey!"

This voice from above me quickly disabused me of any potential danger. It was the guard at the top of the stairway. "Lord Melchior wants you to know that the position is yours if you still want it."

I shaded my eyes with my hand and saw the guard above me holding a tiny piece of paper delivered by the pigeon that had flown over me. That pigeon was now perched on the bannister, its head buried in its feathers, worrying itself with its obsessive preening.

"Tell him I never left the job; the job left me."

The guard stared down at me. “You want me to write *that* down and fly it back over to him?”

“That is my response,” I said.

Shaking his head, the guard took out a pencil, scribbled it down, bound the paper to the pigeon, and with a shove into the air, sent it flying back over the grounds. I watched it go.

Soon, Lord Melchior himself was descending the steps to me.

“Look,” he said when he finally arrived, sweating and puffing, “Freyja wants you as her tutor.”

“Since when?” I asked.

“Apparently from the moment you turned and walked away. Something you said....Look, maybe it was because you were unimpressed with her that she is impressed with you. Everyone else I brought out here has all but cowered before her just because she was royalty...she hadn’t even gotten weird before they started.

“For some reason, you have gained her respect. Or at least her curiosity. Maybe she simply plans to see how much torment you will take before she succeeds in running you off, just out of boredom.

“I don’t care. No one has gotten anything *approaching* an enthusiastic reception before – even if it is out of anger – so you just might end up teaching her something in the meantime.

“Listen, I will double your wages, all right? And I’ll put it all in a lump six months advance, with no obligation to return it if it doesn’t work out –*if* you’ll just agree to give it a thirty day try.”

There was no question, of course, of whether I was going to say “yes” for my own self interests. But I also thought of Freyja.

She really was a very sad case. I, too, knew what it was like to have your childhood taken from you by circumstances out of your control. In her grandiose circumstances, though, the situation became tragic.

Despite having every material reason to be the most popular woman in the kingdom, her future majesty had to be one of the most alone of people in her future realm. As alone, and just as lonely, as her lowly tutor. The difference was, her loneliness mattered.

I expected difficulty. But I also thought, in time, I might disabuse her from this delusion of her “curse.” For a man who as a child had pretended he was a knight on the very ground King Arthur was said to have trod, the chance to rescue a damsel in distress, one who even came with

her own castle (complete with any number of towers in which she might be imprisoned, should she choose to exercise her option) was rather irresistible.

“Very well,” I said. “You have successfully reengaged my services. Tell your goddaughter that lessons begin tomorrow at eight in the morning, and I expect her to be prompt. Of course, I need someone to show me whatever serves as a schoolroom here, so that I may prepare. I need to return to my garret for my things first, though.”

He looked at me, and I could almost smell his desperation. “You *will* return? It’s just a little more than three years before she is to take the throne, and she is already so very behind in her education anyway.”

“Lord Melchior, I assure you, wild horses could not keep me away.”

“That’s not much of an assurance as I do not think they are so naturally inclined. I’m sorry, but I don’t get it.”

I sighed. “My lord, if I do not honor my word and return, then I would reveal myself to be of such character that you would not wish to be depending on me for your goddaughter’s education anyway. Do you agree?”

He nodded. “That is correct. Very well, I do trust you, but...one word, Ambrose. Your role in Freyja’s life is as her instructor in book knowledge, not how she is to conduct herself as queen or in court life. Including her consideration of why she should or should not take a husband in the course of her future duties.”

“I shall teach the queen apparent how to think, not *what* to think,” I said. “From thereon, it’s all up to her. Why should I care? I am a stranger in this country. It is not as though she will ever be my sovereign nor her people my own. Please. Return to the throne in full assurance. Resume court intrigue and subterfuge. I am your man.”

THE ROMANCE AND INTRIGUE IN THIS INTIMATE EPIC ARE ONLY BEGINNING!

And if the road to true love never did run smooth, try traveling it in inclement weather!

Will Freyja thaw or put Ambrose in the deep freeze?

Read *Portrait of a Snow Queen* by Micah S. Harris to find out!