

1. MY MEETING WITH LORD MELCHIOR

"My goddaughter is suffering from what you will, no doubt, think but an extraordinary delusion. Namely, 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 forehead was high, his hair golden tinged with red as was his full beard.

I noticed the tender skin beneath his eyes was remarkably puffy. Small wonder, I thought, if he regularly lost sleep. Serving as regent-guardian for a delusional future queen, one who might drop the reins to the kingdom the moment you passed them into her hands, 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, things were kept pleasingly cool this far inland from the breeze coming off the nearby glacier that topped the peaks of the *Ormrheinen* range.

That frozen mass, left over from the little ice age that had almost wrecked British America's 1775 revolution, had helped Aarastad realize its own declaration of 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 a mental aberration, and whatever else she may suffer from it is purely psychosomatic, assuming there *is* a physical manifestation."

"There are no physical manifestations but neither is her problem entirely psychological, Master Aurelianus. The captivity of her psyche has its origins in a most definite physical event."¹

¹ *Editor's note:* The reader will have noticed that our narrative begins with a conversation already in progress. This is due to the Marquis' handwritten manuscript having been passed down to us with the opening pages missing. As there is no evidence that these sheets were torn out, we must conclude they were never bound when Queen Muriel Tia Ifing Swanson Ifguter (1850-1901) assembled the handwritten pages into volumes. The top leaves of a loose manuscript always stand to be easily lost. No attempt at censorship or suppression at the hands of her Majesty should be inferred. For further information on the transmission of the Marquis' memoirs, see footnote no. 4.

“Lord Melchior, this ‘curse’ sounds all quite peculiar, and I understand why you felt the need to apprise me of it, but 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 Aurelianus, 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.”

“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. I am now about to reveal her circumstances in full, something I have not done before with any applicant. So, if you will....”

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

“Be aware, Master Aurelianus, that the restrictions written therein retroactively apply to every detail about Freyja’s condition that I have already shared with you. Tongues that wag sensitive secrets of state in Aarastad cease to wag at all. You have been warned.”

“There will be no problem in that regard, sir, I assure you,” I said. As I reached for the pen, my gaze momentarily shifted to the statue on his desktop of the goddess Ithunea in the eagle talons of the *Jotun* Thiazi. She was desperately imposing her back between him and the apples she grasped to her bare breasts.

It was the only indulgence in the entire room of unadulterated décor – or unadulterated decadence, if there is such a thing. I had expected much more of the latter, for the summer palace had been built by the previous ruling house, the dissipated Serapions.

Only the image of a topless Ithunea seemed in their style. Otherwise, the study was both stately and austere.

I sat under enormous exposed beams, which, like the paneling, were made of oak. So was the large desk behind which Lord Melchior now sat enthroned in a leather upholstered chair. I, on the other hand, sat on a backless stool.

On the wall opposite the desk hung the floor- to-ceiling portrait of King Olav Ifguter, founder of the current Aarastad dynasty, House Asger.

He had been a true Viking of a man in life. His abundant mane of golden red hair and full beard meant one’s initial impression of him was inescapably leonine, but the aquiline nose was more redolent of a bird

of prey.

Olav Ifguter's eyes had been painted in that fashion which made you feel that they were following you around the room. Add to that a trace of mirth at the corners of his mouth, and one could not help but feel, once you looked away, that he was laughing at you behind your back.

I felt his painted eyes on me as I pulled the dip pen from its well, scrawled my name in the allotted space beneath the regent's ("Bärt Melchior"), then returned the stylus to its place.

"Thank you," Melchior said, as he examined the signature. 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,' which is related to the modern 'Kay,' and of which 'K-a-i,' pronounced 'Ki,' as in my case, is an accepted diminutive form."

He nodded. "So, is 'Kai' legally binding?"

"It is."

"Then we can continue. The ink 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. "I do, of course, wish to meet her future royal highness as soon as possible, 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. My full brown beard covered cheeks that had become sunken from eating only once a day. 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 Latin as *Persona Non Grata*.

2. WAR OF THE YMIR DAUGHTERS

"Now," he said, "the princess' curse came about thusly. About twenty years ago, the mountain people of our country were terrorized by an elemental known as the Ice Maiden. Freyja's grandfather, King Ifguter, the one taking up the wall over there, led a war party to end the threat."

"Of this... 'Ice Maiden.'"

"Yes. They found her 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 survive living beneath a glacier."

"She was an elemental of the blood of Ymir and the brood of Élivágar, a *sorceress* of an elder race They survived by her *magic*, Master Aurelianus. 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 entire derby, I assure you. Pardon my interruption."

"Pardoned. Now, the Ice Maiden was angered at Ifguter's intrusion which she immediately discerned meant her no good. She battered the king and his men with her icy breath, and 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 his 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. The weather-witch had taken quite a fancy to him, you see, and with the illusion of his fiancée's ring that he had lost, she lured him into a lake and captured him.

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

"Rather thoughtful of her, actually," I said.

He raised a reddish-blond eyebrow at me. I chose the better part of valor and determined to keep to myself any further such comments. I could 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 snapped an icicle from the Ice Maiden's nimbus crown and stabbed her deep into her neck. Immediately, she began to spew ice

water from her wound.

“She staggered from the throne and fell to her knees. This gave Ifguter the opening to swing his axe and behead her.

“Ifguter rescued the captives and delivered the head of the Ice Maiden to the mountain people. Meanwhile, Rudy sought out his former bride-to-be and found her...with two little children holding onto her skirt, staring at this strange man.

“Later, 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, he was mourning her as his one true love after all, who had cherished him more than his fiancée.

“Ifguter advised him that all this wailing 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 suited him very well indeed, and...,” a smile flickered upon Lord Melchior’s lips, “...Isolde had already decided that *she* was going to have *him*, months before Rudy got up his courage to ask.

“So it was that he became Prince Rudolph Weiss, adopted son of House Asger and brother-in-law and close friend to Prince Cai, who became King Caius at Ifguter’s death.”

“Rudolph died alongside Caius, didn’t he?” I said.

“Yes, both men died on the mountaintops, near the glacier, with their wives. King Cai and Queen Gerda’s little boy Prince Josef also perished there. The king and queen left no other issue.

“Princess Isolde’s union with Rudolph, however, had turned out to be much more fruitful.

“Thus has Freyja, niece of the rightful king of Aarastad, granddaughter of Ifguter himself, and true daughter of the house of Asger, become the heir apparent. Following her in succession is her younger sister Àsa.”

“Shall I be tutoring her as well?”

“No. Princess Àsa lives in seclusion at the capital palace, a result of the same traumatic event that resulted in her sister’s tragedy, the account of which I shall return to now.

“Preserving the Ice Maiden’s head instead of allowing it to melt turned out *not* to be the best of ideas. The village that kept it boasted of its prize. Word began to spread. Carried by the Northwind, it even reached the farthest island in the Spitzbergen archipelago, where dwelled the Ice Maiden’s mother, Rahnegwyn Ymirdóttir.”

“The ‘Ymir’s daughter’ was notified in *Spitzbergen*...by the *Northwind*?” 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 the *Ormrheinen* range directly behind us.

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

“And then Rahnegwyn Ymirdóttir of the primal brood of *Élivágar* headed immediately for this very palace.”



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

From the drawer, he took out an envelope and removed from it some browning papers which he proceeded to unfold. He cleared his throat and began to read:

Much time had passed since I last felt the chilling embrace of Mora (whom others call ‘Ice Maiden,’ but I know she was not so!). My hope was that the warm caresses 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 following three years had been happy ones by far. I was in love, I had found fulfillment in my duties as a royal prince, and my sweet girl Freyja was now almost three. I expected nothing but the multiplication of my happiness in the future, for my darling Isolde and I were planning to one day present Freyja with a sibling.

I remember that night that would change my young family’s life forever was an unusually freezing one for that late in spring. We had seen the snow on the mountain, and odd it was.

This unseasonable snow brought back memories of my captivity, and the icy caresses I had been forced to endure.

I assured myself that this snowfall was but a freak occurrence of nature. I had handled the Ice Princess’s severed head myself. Mora had not been human, but that did not make her immortal nor supernatural – only other-natural. And she was long dead. Thus, I did not speak of

my fears and unsettle my wife and daughter.

That night, we awoke to a woman's scream. I sat up in bed, all my fears immediately recalled upon waking. We found the nurse collapsed on the floor of the nursery and Freyja squalling uncontrollably.

Our daughter was unhurt; we thought at first that she was only upset from the nurse's screeching. But the nurse said that she had been awakened by Freyja's cry at what she had seen hovering over her bed, and then she, too, had screamed at the eldritch vision:

A tall pale woman with long white hair, whose clothing tinkled like sleet against a windowpane when she moved. Her 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.

At first, I feared Mora had reconstituted. 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.

The woman kissed Freyja's lips, and then a toe, and then an ankle. "More than one but no more than three," she said. Then the nurse told us the terrible doom this creature pronounced over our little girl:

"A daughter for a daughter and I, Rhanegwyn Ymirdóttir, shall be avenged."

She brushed by the nurse on her way out, leaving a trail of glittering frost behind, and the nurse some blackened fingers from the touch of her train.

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

Thereafter we were on guard for that witch of snow and ice. Hot coals were kept burning on the windowsills and at the threshold of each castle door until the unusual cold snap had passed. But she never returned. Not even when wintertime would come.

Years passed. On Freyja's eighth 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 Àsa, our new addition, was darting about our feet, also to my joy.

In this bliss, I smiled into the mirror – and saw the most hideous leer reflected back at me.

Clearly, the Ymirdóttir was behind this vile present and had hoped that Freyja would open the gift and look into the glass. But to what end? She 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 Rahnegwyn Ymirdóttir! Freyja recognized that face at once, and now it was hers!

From that moment on, my daughter was changed, her true personality suppressed. She now believes that she is Rahnegwyn's child, the new Ice Maiden for the old.

My wife, too, saw that horrid face had become our daughter's reflection. Though she sensed that Freyja had already slipped beyond us, she was screaming for me to do something if I loved her.

I fetched Ifguter's axe that had severed the head of this creature's daughter. I should have called for Caius whose father's weapon was his alone to wield. The axe blade was enchanted, there was thus a ban upon it, and the handling of it was beyond me.

Knowing all this, I still took it and swung, with my wife's shrill screams filling my ears, at that awful face in the glass that transfixed my daughter.

I shattered the mirror and sent a tiny splinter of the glass to lodge in Freyja's eye – and another such fragment into an eye of her sister, whom her mother had not removed from the room as I had ordered.

Those pieces still retain the Ymirdóttir's reflection. Thus, my own hand ensured that neither Freyja herself nor her sister would ever see my oldest daughter again as anything but an inhuman creature.

More, Æsa now views the whole world as an uncertain place where good appears as evil and evil appears as good. All is fearful in her eyes, but nothing more so than her own sister.

I understand Æsa's terror at what she sees when she looks at Freyja, for I, too, saw the face in the mirror, the face of an inhuman "Ice Maiden," as Freyja refers to herself now.

As much as being reminded daily of Mora by my own innocent daughter disturbs me, it was not enough to make me despair. That hopelessness came from both an independent attestation of, and elaboration upon, the nature of the horror against which I and my wife found ourselves pitched to save our little girl's soul.

Would that I had never opened that grimoire that had escaped King Ifguter's purging of Aarastad of the Serapions and their familiars. Be assured that after seeing what was rendered on one of its pages, I personally committed that cursed tome to the flames.

For therein was drawn the very face I saw looking back at my daughter from inside that wretched mirror.

The text affirmed it as that of an Ymirdóttirr, then further specified the one pictured as...

"...(S)he who hungered so much for power that she bent to eat decay with that ancient *wyrm* who holds the key to the gate of Niflheimr. He gave her a title, 'Dejadrijik,' 'Mistress to the Lord of the Dead,' called also by the Vikings 'the Pallid Lady, the Lurker Behind the Northwind.'

"She it was whom the Greeks reimagined as 'Medusa.' Aye, and they begged Pindar, in his *History*, to relocate Hercules' beheading of that gorgon to Hyperborea, so that their children might sleep when the Northwind blew in the night."

Knowing, then, the full horror of the elder thing that lurks within my daughter, lusting to be free, to be her (Freyja, Isolde - forgive me, should you ever read this), perhaps there is nothing better that her parents can do than act as though we, too, see through a bewitched glass splinter, and follow Àsa's example to retreat as far away from Freyja as we can.

"But it isn't in the girls' eyes; it is in their *minds*," I said as Melchior returned the paper to the envelope, then locked it again inside the drawer. "I have no idea what sort of mirror trick could have convinced their parents otherwise, but since they *were* thus convinced, did Rudolph and Isolde ever try to have the glass removed?"

"No, they dared not. The specks were so tiny that any attempt to extract them would have run the risk of blinding their daughters in their penetrated eyes. And it quickly became apparent that the girls' vision was never in any danger from the embedded splinters...their *natural* vision."

"Their vision in *one* eye," I said. "So, why not place a patch over the source of their distorted perception? Why didn't they think that would cancel it out?"

"For one, their eyes would have to have been covered perpetually, risking the organ atrophying. The girls then would have been as blind as if they *had* suffered a botched operation. For another, their parents did come to realize that the problem was far more complex than merely countering the physical wound, especially in Freyja's case."

"What do you mean?"

"Àsa never actually looked in the mirror. However, she has an embedded fragment from it which, like the speck in Freyja's, also retains the reflection of Rahnegwyn Ymirdóttirr or 'the Pallid Lady.' However, Àsa does not believe that *she* has been transformed into an Ymirdóttirr. She believes her sister has. She sees Freyja and everything else in the world as something to be feared. Thus, she cowers in confinement at Elfarborg palace to this day.

"And though Rudolph's reflection was distorted by the mirror, he remained himself. In his mind, he

did not become an elemental being. He could also see, alongside his own altered image, the ghastly, pale reflection of Rahnegwyn that belonged to Freyja alone.

“Recall that Rudolph said Freyja’s personality altered the moment she saw that face as her own. The change had already set in before the splinter entered her eye. No doubt its presence has complicated Freyja’s deliverance, but clearly this particular enchantment was meant for *her*, in line with the curse her nurse reported Rahnegwyn Ymirdóttir uttering over her.

“Thus, Freyja 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 that 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 delusion is so strong upon her that, in her mind, the rules that bind such an elemental being now bind her.”

“How so?”

“The royal family consulted a wisewoman among our Russian immigrants. She identified an ‘Ymirdóttir’ as the same genus of the Russian *Snuegurauchka*. As such, this particular elemental is extremely vulnerable to affectionate caresses from the merest of mere mortals. ‘More than one but no more than three’ such touches would burden the non-human with a human soul and all its natural yearnings.”

“Freyja would fall in love...”

“Love for a man, love for a child....it doesn’t matter. In that terrible moment, the shell of her body would then burst beyond reclaiming as her pure elemental self was unleashed. Her disembodied consciousness would be blown beyond her control amidst the planet’s snow, sleet and hail as long as the world stands.

“This, she is convinced, would be her state until the elements themselves pass away: to always feel her humanity most poignantly, but, now bodiless, also be sundered from any and all meaningful human companionship.”

He stared at me through narrowed eyes.

“Yes?” I said.

His gaze momentarily shifted down to the desk where the signed document of confidentiality lay. I looked at it, then back up to meet his stare.

“The ink is now dry, Master Aurelianus.”

“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 prospect of pairing Freyja off with a proper husband.”

“But you said the Ice Maiden was smitten with Freyja’s father. Did she never touch him?”

“It is the loving touch of the *mortal* that is fatal. If Rudy ever caressed her icy flesh, it was out of coercion. That doesn’t count.”

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

“Freyja’s mind, Master Aurelianus, has been possessed by a *true* Ymirdóttirr. So, although she has no actual magical existence as ‘the Ice Maiden,’ nor lives in danger of disembodiment, ‘only in her mind’ doesn’t quite get it.

“My story now 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, and I wish her to have a liberal learning which I understand that you are able to supply.

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

I stroked my bearded chin as I studied the concern etched in his face as he waited for my answer. By this point, I did have to question Lord Melchior’s own sanity. Yet, the man who had interviewed me was perfectly lucid and had been successfully managing a kingdom for three years.

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

I smiled. “I’m in,” I said, “but after how you’ve described her, I need some idea of what I’ll be up against in the classroom. Is the princess of sound enough mind to learn maps, mathematics, and science...and to grasp the abstractions of poetry and philosophy? How should I plan our course of study?”

“Freyja possesses a completely rational mind except in regard to her curse. I can assure you that she does not go about upbraiding the furniture for being sedentary, and she has no problem distinguishing a moonbeam from a sock garter.”

“Well, that’s a start,” I said.

“There *is* one more thing, Master Aurelianus.”

“Yes?”

“Freyja is both very beautiful and on the cusp of full womanhood. And you are not nearly as much her senior as I would prefer. Nor do you have a wife.”

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

He furrowed his brow as he extended his hand. "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 Ymir's daughter's tutor. I just had to survive meeting her.

And every day afterward.

3. THE MYSTERIOUS TRAGEDY OF EALATHOUNE THE FAIR

The terrace that served as Princess Freyja's private *hofgarten* was but one outstanding feature of an overall extraordinary palace.

The summer royal residence consisted of two main buildings situated on a plateau. The story behind its building is most relevant to the one at hand. For it is part of the tragic tale of Ealathoune the Fair, first queen of the last Serapion king, Lothar Turanus.

As a young princess of Man, Ealathoune had aspired to be an architect and would have rather been seated before a drafting table than on a throne. That, however, was not to be her fate.

She had once visited Bath to observe both its ancient Roman architecture and that of the then current Regency era. She had fallen in love with the style of the residential buildings of the wealthy there.

Learning of this, King Lothar built his intended a two-story mansion in Regency fashion. That was the beginning of this summer palace, raised also to serve as an elaborate seasonal retreat for the royal family. Behind and rising above it, connected by a large courtyard, was the palace's second building.

Added later, this was a massive, multi-floored Swiss chalet, anchored at each corner by covered gothic towers in the Transylvanian style (another touch inspired by Queen Ealathoune's travels).

The chalet's roof was multi-gabled. In its center, a slender, sea green spiral tower rose, its point exceeding those of the Transylvanian spires. Its aquamarine color and its shape, suggesting a slender protoconch of a gastropod's shell, were intended to honor the maritime origins of the Aarastad people.

Directly beneath this central tower was a chapel, the chalet's highest chamber. Despite its exalted position, it had been immediately sealed off under mysterious circumstances soon after completion and never reopened during the remainder of House Serapion's rule. Even after House Asger opened the chapel, it remained too tainted by horror and grief to be used as a house of worship.

For the palace chapel had become part of the stage on which the final act in the tragedy of Queen Ealathoune the Fair had unfolded.

Ealathoune was a direct descendant of Godred Crovan, whose issue rules the island to this day. Her stunning physical beauty and sweet personality had made her coveted by all the surrounding courts.

However, she was also an independent and intellectual young woman of uncompromising virtue and conviction. Naturally, these qualities discouraged *many* a royal match. Otherwise, it is doubtful that a man with the family reputation of Lothar Turanos Serapion would have been allowed as much as an introduction.

Indeed, my understanding is that extenuating circumstances led to their meeting or they never would

have. Whatever Lothar Serapion possessed that had finally won her, it did not last long. Barely married a year, the new queen began a series of *solo* goodwill tours abroad.

That King Lothar tolerated these extended separations, as well as the buildings he raised at her desire, indicate that he had a true regard for her, and even yearned for the return of the favor that he had lost. Perhaps, if it was possible for a Serapion to love, he had loved her.

Then, during one of her inevitable returns to Aarastad, she had fallen from the balcony of that high chapel. But was it an accident or by intent? And if the latter, was it another's will that she die, ...or her own?

No one knows what happened in that chapel right before Ealathoune plunged to her death. At least, no one who had ever come forward bodily in public. He, or she, *had* borne anonymous witness, though that had been "silenced" by another person –or persons – under even *more* mysterious circumstances.

I would not have discovered the record of this testimony but for my lonely explorations of the summer palace during my first days there. Uncatalogued among the documents and artifacts in the royal archives, I came across an extraordinary bit of wood paneling.

It was the same pine as that of the walls of the palace chapel. As I later confirmed, its size and shape perfectly fit where a small section had been sloppily excised, as though in haste.

Carved into that cut bit of paneling was this:



EALATHOUNE
THOU SHALT BE AVENGED!

What was the meaning of this altered Inguz rune? How did it relate to this passionate vow? And *who* left both behind? A lover? Without doubt, Ealathoune had attracted many admirers at court, but no one had ever accused her of being unfaithful to her husband with any of them.

And even if she was ever inclined otherwise, just the thought of ending up in the hands of the pitiless Lothar Turanus Serapion would have quickly cooled any potential court paramour's ardor.

Some conjectured that she had been carrying on an affair outside the court, when she was abroad. Then, the king found her out, and that was why he put an end to her travels.

Others said it was not at all because of an affair that she had become a prisoner in her own summer palace.

Rather, it was because Lothar would not allow her to leave Aarastad yet again before producing an heir...

...and that she was desperately trying to escape him when she fell...

...and that she was with child at the time.

The dark details of all that had happened at this palace under the Serapions, safely removed on its plateau from the villages and capital below, remained largely a mystery to the people of Aarastad.

But they knew enough to understand that what King Lothar had built for love of Ealathoune had become, in her absences, where the depraved royals indulged their darkest desires.

Only those who lived in the surrounding area had a better, by which I mean horrific, acquaintance with what was on the other side of that veil. They remembered all too well the dark age before Freyja's grandfather King Ifguter had brought in a new era, one both beneficent and felicitous.

Little wonder that Lord Melchior did not wish her future subjects to know that the queen apparent had declared herself an elemental witch-daughter of the Ymir.

For the shadow the Serapions had cast over Aarastad in their day had turned out to be a long one indeed, extending even into the dawn of a new dynasty.

4. THE POLAR BEAR AND THE PICT

So, there you have, in brief, the exotic buildings and the mysterious history of where Princess Freyja lived in what we shall call 'her condition' the entire year 'round.

She did not live in total seclusion like her sister. Hardly. Freyja was, in fact, often seen about. By her own choice, however, this was usually alone and in the margins. Whenever she did have to endure close company, she always 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?"

My ears began to sting. "No. There was a heroic dog named *Jöt*, but he is strictly supporting cast."

Before I could place *Jöt* in full context, my attention was diverted by something else. Just as we passed the guard at the top of the stairs and stepped onto the vast terrace of beautiful trees and flowers, we were met by the first of several signs on picket style posts. 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 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 ICE MAIDEN, SHE OF THE VANIR,
FREYJA ITHUNEA LEONTOPODIUM ALPINUM
(EMPHASIS ON THE FIRST SYLLABLE,
SOUNDS LIKE: "GO AWAY!")

Melchior sighed and shook his head. "It would appear Freyja is not receiving today."

I pointed at the sign. "'Freyja Ithunea *Leontopodium Alpinum*?' That's Latin for 'edelweiss.'"

"Freyja, of course, has her father's last name to which her parents added the penultimate appellation 'Edelle.' Hence, she is 'Freyja Ithunea Edelle Weiss.' She forbids anyone to address her by what she considers a most unfortunate conjunction of *nomenclatura* that no living being should be forced to endure.

"The scientific classification of 'edelweiss' is how she gets around it until she takes the ancestral name of 'Ifguter' as Asger Queen."

Another eye-catching string of barbed *bon mots* served as a postscript to the previous sign:

SPECIAL NOTE TO ALL PROSPECTIVE SUITORS:
GO PARK YOUR BAROUCHE OUTSIDE SOMEONE
ELSE'S CASTLE

"No lovesick swains here," I said.

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?!"

"There's just the one."

"That's plenty!"

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, Theodyn 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 coat that was yellowing in patches.

“So, his name is ‘Theodyn?’”

“He prefers ‘Teddy.’”

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 blue tongue, which was of a tepid warmth. He looked up at me, blinked his dark eyes, rumbled out a ‘harumph,’ then, apparently satisfied, returned 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 at the latest sign in our path.

GO AWAY! I (FROST) BITE!

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

IF YOU HAVE PROCEEDED 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, Princess Freyja Ithunea Ifguter *Leontopodium Alpinum*.

Or, as she had been christened, Freyja Ithunea Ifguter Edelle Weiss.

This was how I first saw her at a distance: seated erect on a stone bench near a tall 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.

Her gown of muted earth colors fit her perfectly. 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 wore falconer gloves (because they did not make *pigeoneer* 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 lips were full and red, and there was blush in her cheeks. Otherwise, her skin was astonishingly white, yet not in a manner that suggested she was sickly and feeble.

To the contrary, she radiated a glacier's imperviousness that would have seemed incommensurate with her slim frame and delicate features, except for the strength implied in how she held herself.

In total, she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and, simultaneously, the most off-putting haughty creature I had ever laid eyes on 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 years ago. Do not be deceived by the loin cloth. He has his own top hat and tails in his closet.

"During King Caius and Queen Gerda's day, he became part of the fashionable entourage of natural wonders which a queen was expected to have. The queen's personal sideshow also included the polar bear you just met, and there was a dwarf as well."

"So, I've met the bear and now the Pict. What of the dwarf? Is he still about?"

“No. No, I am afraid not. He was with the king and queen – oh, she adored him, could not bear to be without ‘Pea,’ oh, no. So, he was with them when the royal family, sans Freyja and Àsa who both had colds, traveled up to the mountain to see the glacier.

He sighed. “If only Queen Gerda had not doted on the young prince, whose idea that jaunt was. But he had always been sick since birth, and now that his health was at last robust, neither she nor his father had the heart to deny him anything. Then the weather suddenly turned bad, an extended blizzard set in, and they quickly became lost and stranded.”

Here, he paused and grimaced.

“What?” I asked, sensing there was more to the royal family’s demise than slow death by freezing.

He lowered his voice. “After the weather on the mountains allowed for a search party, it was yet some time before we found the group’s remains. The evidence was that the guards apparently had turned on the royals and their entourage...and eaten them.”

“They were *eaten*?!”

I looked at the imperious Freyja and felt a stab of pity for her.

“So,” Melchior said, “to get back to your question, that’s what happened to the dwarf. That left us with an aging polar bear and an atavistic wild man. Thule, as he was named by Queen Gerda, has become quite attached to Princess Freyja.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. He was extremely fond of her aunt the queen, you see, and now he has placed himself in the role of protector of her niece and heir to the throne.”

“Does anyone know his circumstances prior to being blown ashore here?” I asked.

“Thule came to us a mute. Neither has he shown any indication that he has learned to understand, except at its most basic, the Dano-Norwegian of his new home.”

“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?”

“Of course.”

“Then go along with me.” “What is your plan?”

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

5. THE PRINCESS FREYJA ITHUNEA IFGUTER EDELLE 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,” Lord Melchior said as we came to a stop before her, “This is your new tutor, Master Ambrose Gaius Aurelianus.”

I bowed. She sniffed and raised her chin.

“You mean the new fool,” she said.

“Freyja!” Melchior chided her.

I looked ‘the Ice Maiden’ 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 a 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 looked at me, his eyebrows narrowing. “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 Ice Maiden, 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-and-a-half-year-old girl in need of an education, some manners, and probably an overdue good spanking.”

Her eyes widened as she regarded me, this time not with contempt but utter incredulity. “Oh? And are you the one to administer it?”

“You are going too far, schoolmaster,” 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 voice. "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 hand on the posterior destined to sit 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*."

I turned to her and took a few steps back, ostentatiously looking 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*.

"*Freyja Ithunea Ifguter!*" Melchior was shouting as I darted out from under the tree.

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 of *what*, he is dealing with?"

"He did," I said, "but it was so ridiculous, I didn't think it was worth retaining."

"I *am* Ymirdóttir!" 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 the speck of cursed mirror in there that still held the reflection of the Ymirdóttir who enthralled her. 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 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? Whatever it was, it should not have happened to anyone. 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, sir,” Lord Melchior said, “I have decided that you will not do. 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 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! And I was so hopeful...”

He slowly shook 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 with yet another tutor.

“I want you to know,” I said, “that I never seriously intended to lay neither hand nor 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 which you made clear when Lord Melchior presumed that *he* decides 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, "if the regent and the rest begin to pressure you to marry some prince they've selected and reduce you to the role of royal brood mare. I don't know you, Freyja Ithunea 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 sighed. Now it was back to my attempts to survive by writing poetry. Ah, well, I thought, one could do without the luxury of eating daily or having a roof over one's head.

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 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!"

Men in hauberks, helmets, and chainmail intercepted me and crossed their staves, staring blankly ahead like soulless automatons. Obviously, there was no use appealing to these gentlemen's sense of outrage at an abuse of power to perpetuate an injustice.

"Hey!"

This voice above me quickly disabused me of the threat of any potential danger. It was the guard at the top of the stairway. "Lord Melchior says don't leave. The position is yours."

I shaded my eyes with my hand and saw the guard was holding a tiny piece of paper delivered by the pigeon that had flown over me. That pigeon was now perched on the banister, 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.

Soon, Lord Melchior himself was descending the steps.

"Look," he said. "Freyja wants you as her tutor."

“Since when?”

“Apparently since you turned and walked away. Something you said. Maybe it was because you were unimpressed that she was unimpressed with you. Everyone else has cowered before her.

“For whatever 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. I don’t care. 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” simply out of my own self interests. But I also thought of Freyja.

You see, I, too, knew what it was like to have your childhood taken from you by circumstances out of your control.

The difference was, *she* still had a life to reclaim.

I expected difficulty, but, over our time together, I might be able to help free her from this madness that held her mind captive.

For a man who, as a child in his native Caerleon, had played on the very ground King Arthur was said to have walked, the chance to rescue a beautiful 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 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 must return to my garret in the village for my things first, though.”

“But you *will* return? It’s just a little more than three years before she is to take the throne, and she is already very behind in her education.”

“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.”

“My lord, I must have this situation, or I will starve. *That* is a more off-putting option than even the princess, you must admit. I will return.”

“Very well, 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, including whether 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. Resume court intrigue and subterfuge. I am your man.”²

² *Editor’s Note:* In this chapter, the Marquis reflected briefly on his life before his arrival in Aarastad in 1843. Perhaps the missing pages mentioned in our previous footnote, if not an entire previous volume, included a full account of his youth in the village of Caerleon in Wales.

The truth is we are fortunate to have as much of his memoirs as we possess, for any artifacts from Aarastad are rarer than Archaeopteryx teeth. Occasionally, a bit of coin of the realm or a postage stamp will appear for sale on the internet. These bits of ephemera quickly vanish in a manner befitting ephemera.

In fact, when it came time to carve up Europe anew after the First World War, it was discovered that the entire country had vanished! There is a rumor of a self-governing six city blocks, complete with post office, library, and city hall (no architectural styles identified as post-1905) which yet remain in the 21st century.

The only way to get there, however, is to stumble across the place. No one has ever been able to find his or her way there by looking for Aarastad. The locale has proven impervious to satellite and on-line maps probing. Selfies taken there disappear of their own volition from cellphone memory and storage clouds, and, of course, there is no tower service available there.

Visitors report a constant, pleasant scent of just-after-a-spring-rain in the air, and laughing kids in beanies and short pants rolling along with sticks seraphimic hoops within hoops, full of eyes, down the streets. (This final detail may have been cribbed from a canvas by surrealist Swiss painter Aki Transtromer (1880-1926) which is now only visible on the wall in a photograph of the office of Albert Travina, last known prime minister of Graustark. Graustark is like Aarastad, another small European kingdom not-to-be-found).

Those who have been to Aarastad find upon their return that the sky is never as blue, nor the grass never as green, as it was there. They become obsessed with shadows, seeing them where others do not and pronouncing disparaging remarks upon them.

It is fitting that, whenever the little country does reportedly become tangible on occasion, it appears to still exist in the past. For, as someone has said, “The past is like another country; they do things differently there.”

I offer my own variation on the above to the reader to explain any jarring historical anachronisms you have already or will encounter in word, deed, or event recorded herein: “This past is another world; they did things differently there.”

6. ELSINORE STUTES

The coach that carried me down to the village to collect my things was an inferior one, as apparently befit my now officially inferior servant status at the palace, and the ride less than smooth.

I settled accounts with my landlady and gathered my few possessions. The sun was now setting. By the time the coach returned me to the summer palace, twilight had settled over the plateau and the northern stars had begun to show.

This time, I was not taken to the front entrance but the rear. The coachman did not move to help with my meager luggage. I set my valises on the pavement, and immediately the carriage was rattling away, one long, continuous convulsion of violent shivers on wheels. Seeing it in action from the outside, I had to wonder how I had ever made the trip without the vehicle falling away from me in pieces.

A girl who looked to be in her late teens appeared at the back door and came on hastening feet to greet me. Her hair was reddish blond drawn up under a cap, and a soiled duster covered her dress. She was freckled, short, and buxom and had a gap in her front teeth that could easily become endearing.

I decided I liked her at once, and my faith would turn out to be very well placed indeed.

“Master Aurelianus?” she asked, her footsteps slowing as she neared me.

“I am Ambrose Aurelianus, yes. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

She smiled. After a day in the company of the beautiful people, with their snobbishness, her alacrity was like a cool glass dipped straight from a wellspring after a day of dust and unrelenting sun.

“I am Elsinore Stutes,” she said. “My sweetheart has the room across from yours. He saw them getting it ready for a new occupant, made some enquiries, and he has now sent me to invite you to join us in a late supper of cold chicken and wine, if you please, sir.”

I smiled. “Thank you. I accept your kind offer.”

I had not, in fact, eaten since breakfast and Lord Melchior had not offered to mention where I might partake of a meal here upon my return.

I did not relish having my initial solo encounter with the princess on a very empty stomach. The morrow looked to be a contentious one. Oh, yes. I knew better than to equate her acceptance of me as tutor with having earned her favor. I fully expected to be tried. *Robustly.*

I began loading up my luggage in my arms. Elsinore immediately reached in and started grabbing up a couple of my valises.

“Thank you for your help,” I said.

“You’re very welcome,” she said. “Johan, that’s my sweetheart, and I have been looking forward to

meeting you. You see, Johan is well-educated and cultured, and he so desires conversation with a like mind."

"And what are *your* interests, Elsinore Stuttes?"

She sighed and smiled, staring ahead. "Whatever interests Johan," she said. "And how long have you known each other?"

She sighed again, and her smile broadened. "Two years this month...in fourteen days, eight hours, and fifteen minutes."

"And how old are you, Elsinore?"

"Nineteen. Why do you ask?"

"I can't help but wonder: how *ever* did you occupy yourself for seventeen years without him?" I smiled. She grinned and shrugged.

"Well, I used to like to draw. Children. And cats."

"You must show me some of your art."

She blushed and shook her head. "Oh, no, no," she said. "I couldn't do that."

"Ah, assuming you haven't burned your efforts, you *could*, but you do not wish to. Why not?"

"I...don't think they are very good," she said.

"I have studied art, Elsinore. Why not let me have a look and give you my opinion? You may be selling yourself short. Wouldn't you like to pick up drawing again?"

"I might...but it would take away from my time with Johan, and we have so little time together as is."

"Tell me about Johan."

"He is a musician. And a composer. He has a royal patron who has commissioned a symphony from him."

My ears pricked up at once. "A patron from this palace, you say?"

"I...am not supposed to say anything about it. In fact, I cannot say much more for I know nothing other than that. But whoever he is, he brought my Johan to me, so I am grateful."

"I am certain Johan considers himself already well rewarded, too."

Her smile lifted her cheeks and pleasantly creased her eyes.

As we talked, we had passed through the ground floor of the servants' quarters. Butlers, drudges, and chambermaids were all watching our progress. One young woman's attention to us had caused Elsinore to raise her chin slightly.

The woman was beautiful: raven-haired, tall, and slender; her cream-colored gown exquisite with its breast plates, diamond spangled girdle, golden embroidery and off-the-shoulder cut.

"Elsinore," I said as we began to climb a narrow set of stairs, "who was that striking woman from whom you seemed to be pleased to steal the spotlight as we passed?"

"Oh? You mean Bodil?"

"The one who looked more like a lady in waiting than a household servant."

"Bodil is both fish and fowl," Elsinore said. "She has a palace apartment with the nobles in the Regency mansion, but her regular room is here. Though, she does enjoy a private one."

"The rest of us are piled up as many as three a room. Far too small for three *girls*."

"Why does Bodil have *two* apartments to call her own, and one of them next door to nobility?" I said.

"Four months out of the year she stays in the Regency mansion where she has a studio. That is where she designs the gowns of the season for the ladies of the court, and they want her nearby where she'll be available at once."

"And what does she do the rest of the year?"

"She is the royal dressmaker for the Princess Freyja Ithunea."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. All her advantages have made her so vain," she said, "but all the boys fall in love with her."

"Not Johan," I said.

"He was once."

"What ended it?"

She giggled. "I did."

"Oh? Do tell."

"I was bringing them tea in the Princess Freyja Ithunea's private *hofgarten* –" "Just a moment. How did *that* happen? I was under the impression that Princess Freyja was less willing to share her personal space than Bodil would be a closet."

Elsinore raised her hand and cackled behind it again. Then she said, "This was a special privilege. The Princess Freyja Ithunea was thanking Bodil for making a gown for her sister on the anniversary of their parents' deaths."

"Was this gown perhaps for her sister's attendance of an annual memorial service?"

"No. The deaths of the princesses' parents, the king and queen, and the young prince are only remembered on that day by black curtains in all the palace windows."

"So, Freyja intended the dress as a gift to comfort her sister?"

"I suppose. Anyway, as I was serving them (Johan and Bodil; not the princesses Freyja Ithunea and

Àsa Elaine), I stumbled and spilled hot tea on his lap. He bellowed, and Bodil immediately turned on me ferociously.”

“But not Johan.”

“I did not give him the chance. I ran away in tears while he was still screaming. You see, I had seen him around the servants’ quarters for some time, and I thought him very handsome. That was why my hands were shaking.

“I heard Bodil saying to him, ‘My poor darling! I will see to it that *that* girl never so much as serves the hounds at this palace again.’

“I returned to my room and began packing my things, for she had the favor of the Princess Freyja Ithunea. Then there was a knock on my door, but I would not answer it, for I was certain that Bodil had come here to gloat and personally let me know I was dismissed. Then *he* spoke.

“I would not even open the door for him at first, and when I did, I would not let him in. He told me he had come to thank me for showing him Bodil’s true face, which he said he found to be very ugly indeed.

“Then he asked if he might see me the next day.

“‘Why would you want to do that?’ I asked him.

“‘*Because,*’ he said, ‘you are a young woman who can ask me with all sincerity, ‘why would you want to do that?’”

She sighed as though she was seeing him across the threshold at that very moment. “How he smiled when he looked at me.”

“And it’s been true love ever since,” I said.

“It has,” she said. “Now,” she said and pointed, “there is your room. When you are settled, knock on that door across the hallway. That is Johan’s.”

My apartment consisted of one room. I found a water basin already prepared, more of Elsinore’s thoughtful attentiveness, no doubt, and began to clean up.

I found my thoughts straying back to Freyja presenting her sister with a special dress. Had that been an act of kindness to Àsa? If so, her behavior was entirely the opposite of ‘no longer human,’ for it would be an on-going family bond that she was acknowledging.

Well, I thought, I dare not confront her with *that*. But it does indicate that she is perhaps not entirely removed from humanity. Still, that happened around two years ago. Perhaps the bond that had existed then was tenuous at best and had snapped since.

I looked at my face in the mirror over the water basin and gave my head a quick shake. “Enough of that girl for tonight!” I said. “I shall soon have more than my fill of her on a nearly daily basis.”

So, I cleaned up, straightened my cravat, stepped across the hall and knocked on Johan's door.

A smiling Elsinore greeted me. I immediately saw a small table, lit by a little candelabrum which put the whole room in amber light.

Reclining on a low couch before the fireplace, tuning his violin, was Johan. He smiled upon seeing me, immediately putting his instrument aside on a small footrest as he rose.

I was immediately struck by his height. He was rangy in build and towered over the more compact Elsinore. In fact, he was a good head above me as well. Perhaps that was why, along with his quickly established considerably more worldliness, he always called me 'young man' even though, at twenty-four, I was three years his senior.

His clothes were always very nice, even though he could not afford the latest fashion. Still, he knew how to put such garments as he did possess together nicely, which, I guess, was how Bodil had justified being seen publicly with him. His full head of brown hair was noticeably mussed, Elsinore's work, no doubt, and a day's worth of beard stubble peppered his face.

"Master Ambrose Gaius Aurelianus?" he said. "Johan Swinburne. I am very glad to meet you, sir."

7. FRUSTRATED ARTISTS

With a smile, I took his outstretched hand.

"I am very happy to make your acquaintance as well, Master Swinburne. 'Ambrose' is fine by the way. I don't look to be that much older than you."

He shook his head and slightly frowned. "But I *so* enjoy saying 'Ambrose Gaius Aurelianus.'" Then he smiled and said, "I must be simply 'Johan' to you."

He shut the door behind me. "Please, come to the table. Dinner is almost ready. My Elsie is a wonderful cook."

"Oh, and *you* can drop the 'Master Aurelianus,' too, Elsinore," I said. "I'm 'Ambrose' to you as well."

"Then I am 'Elsie,'" she said with that smile she seemed to always have at the ready.

Elsinore did not fail to live up to her lover's accolade. What she had done with cold chicken, bread, potatoes, and a salad could have proudly served the royals' table. During our after-dinner conversation, I told her so. She smiled, but quickly tucked her head and blushed.

"And now," she said, rising from the table, "I will leave you learned men to talk."

"No, stay," I said. "Talk with us. I like girls. Don't you, Johan?"

"I know I like this one very much. Just a little longer, please, dearest?" Johan said.

"I must go," she said. She and Johan blew kisses at each other. Then she took from a hook on the door a shawl, slid it over her shoulders, and waved her fingers at us.

"Goodnight, boys," she said. "So very nice to have met you, Master Ambro—" – she caught herself – "Ambrose," she said.

"A pleasure, Elsie" I said. "Thank you for all of your attentiveness. You have been a kind and thoughtful hostess to this stranger."

She curtsied, then blew a final kiss to Johan. I turned my head to see him catching it out of the air. Then I heard the door close behind me.

"Shall we retire to the couch," he asked, indicating the sofa before the fire with a toss of his head.

"Certainly," I said.

We situated ourselves there, with wine glasses replenished courtesy of my host, and stared into the fire.

"You are a fortunate man, Johan. What a refreshingly down-to-earth young woman for a man to call his own."

"Don't I know it," he said. "The women who have been my lovers in the past... far too many dramatics."

The one who was to be my last, the royal seamstress... boy, did the shrew ever come out of that girl – *fast*.”

“I suppose,” he said, “that you shall have your own experience of an unpleasant woman soon enough, and on a daily basis.”

“Oh, yes. The princess,” I said.

He nodded. “Spooky Ithunea. I don’t envy you, even if she’s just half the harpy her seamstress is.”

I furrowed my brow. “She’s not...that’s not really fair to call her that.”

“What? Have you gone soft on her already, man?”

“Wha-? No! I have not ‘gone soft!’”

“That’s good. Because, from what I’ve heard, if she senses weakness, she will chew you up and spit you out like pulp.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“From her former tutors, some of who’ve inhabited that same room you do now. I’m talking grown men crying. It was quite a disgusting display. Please, promise me you won’t disgust me, Ambrose. I’m rather liking you.”

“It sounds like it would be to my benefit to know what she might be planning for me at this very moment. Tell me, what did she say or do that reduced my predecessors to tears?”

“Well, one fellow, while he was throwing his clothes in his valise, told me he’d been teaching his heart out for a good hour, and she wouldn’t even look at him. She just kept doing the same imaginary math problem repeatedly on her slate, what she said, when asked, was ‘the square root of the golden mean to the infinite power.’

“He reminded her politely that they were supposed to be doing their Latin grammar at that moment. She said, again, ‘I’m factoring the square root of the golden mean to the infinite power,’ erased whatever she’d been scrawling and started it all over again.

“It got to where he could hardly get a word out of his mouth before she cut him off: ‘Square root of the golden mean to the infinite power.’

Finally, he could take it no longer and blurted out, “My future queen, why am I even here?”

She looked him up and down and said, ‘I have been wondering the same thing myself. For this is not a circus, and I have no need of any clowns.’”

I found myself grinning. “That...that’s rather good, actually.”

“What? Now you’re *admiring* her impertinence? Oh, she’ll see that as weakness. Don’t let her sense *that* in you, my boy. It’ll be like a shark smelling blood in the water.”

“Yes, yes, you’re right, of course. Why don’t we steer our topic of conversation toward a more pleasant

member of the fair sex, namely, your Elsie.”

“Ah. My favorite subject indeed.”

“She told me that can draw, but that she isn’t very good.”

“Is *that* what she told you?”

“Yes. Of course, I haven’t seen anything of hers to be able to form an opinion of my own.”

“Well!” he said, rising and going to the room’s single closet. “Let’s change that right now.”

I began looking at Elsie’s pieces...and smiled. “These are actually quite exceptional.”



He had been regarding me with narrowed eyes as I regarded Elsinore’s art. Then he snapped his fingers and pointed: “I knew I recognized your name when I heard it. You wrote a poem.”

“A lot of them, actually.”

“But this...” He began snapping his fingers rapidly, then he pointed at me again. “*This* was about a heroic goat.”

“Uhm....” I shifted my weight. “It was a heroic dog, actually, named ‘Jöt.’”

“Oh, well. ‘Jöt;’ ‘goat.’ You can see how some confusion might arise.”

“No, actually, I can’t. And the dog was just the sidekick, by the way.”

“Of whom?”

“My Viking hero.”

“Ah! A Viking. And does this strapping marauder have a name?”

“He does: ‘Dane ‘White Fang’ Dan Sven Jorgen.’”

He stared at me.

“But he goes by Denny. Anyway, the Viking wasn’t the focus, either. More of an off-stage presence that influences the actions of his paramour who is the main character.”

“Ah! This is a love poem, then. I like it already. And what is the title of this romance?”

“*Upon a Fjord, Dying Young.*”

Again, he stared at me.

I slid down a bit into the couch. “You see, she is eagerly watching for his return from atop a fjord, where she is, in fact, dying young.”

“Does *he* know she’s dying?”

“No.”

“Does *she* know he has a goat?”

"He *doesn't* have a goat! Jöt's a *dog*! A *heroic* dog! A hound with which to be reckoned! A stand up, take the troll by the testicles in his jaws, swing on 'em some and *then* he'll bite 'em off before he lets him eat *his* master kind-of-*dog*!"

I realized my face had reddened beyond the fireplace's power to make it, and I knew that old vein had popped out on my forehead.

Johan slowly shook his head as he regarded me.

"I feel as though I am perhaps witnessing the dawn of a new age of poetry... just from your synopsis alone."

I sank farther into the sofa. "One can but hope," I said and took another sip of wine.

"So," he said, nodding at Elsinore's drawings. "You really think these are exceptional?"

"I do."

"I agree absolutely. She is a talent. Unfortunately, she has made the mistake of comparing herself to Bodil."

"Why should she be intimidated by her? Doing society portraits and exhibiting in galleries isn't the same as...Oh. I see. Elsinore wants to design court fashion, too."

"She *does* design it. Look at this."

He pulled a drawing from the bottom. It depicted a willowy beauty in an impressive black formal dress, all a-glitter with diamond dust. A dark blue sash and train completed the off-the-shoulder gown.

"*This* is even more impressive than her life drawings," I said.

"What about this? When we dine again...as I hope we shall..."

"Indeed. We must break bread together again and that soon."

"Then, next time, what say you and I prepare dinner, and let Elsie use the time to sketch?"

"You're suggesting... that you and I, who are men, *cook*...for a woman?"

I shrugged. "Well, why not? Shouldn't women have the same chance to pursue their creative dreams that their tender and faithful domestic ministrations allow us men to do?"

"Now, let's not get ambitious," Johan said. "My word, man! Do you think the two of us are going to overturn the prevalent social order singlehandedly in one evening?"

"Well, if we work together, it isn't exactly 'single-handedly.' And I didn't mean that we should do it once and stop."

"But...no one else does *smultringers* like Elsie," he said. "I mean, the *glaze*, man...THE GLAZE!"

I sighed. "Well, my offer stands. She deserves some time off from the *smultringers* to draw. That's what I say."

"Yes, well, you say that now. Wait 'till you have a bite of one of them. You'll be on *my* side."

"All right. We have discussed my art and Elsinore's, but what of yours, Johan? What can you tell me about this symphony of yours? Who is your patron?"

He shifted his weight on the couch and shrugged.

"I'm making you uncomfortable by prying," I said.

He waved me off. "It's just that my patron insists on my remaining tight-lipped. I will tell you, though you must keep this confidential, the title of the symphony which I am composing for him."

"My lips are sealed. Pray tell, what is it?"

"*Elegy for Ealathoune, the Fair*. Other than that, the less you know, the better. The less I know the better. In fact, I don't even know the identity of my patron."

"Really?"

"Yes. And he is to be the only audience ever for the completed work. I shall be blindfolded when I perform, as shall be the entire orchestra. In fact, I am blindfolded now when we meet, and I play for him."

"What you're describing sounds creepily obsessive."

He shrugged. "My pay's the same. I don't mean to sound like a hack, but, at this time in my career, money's the thing. I want to marry Elsie, and this will go a good way toward achieving that goal."

"And now, I best say no more, but...perhaps I *shall* play you some musical selections from my forbidden symphony."

"On the violin?"

"On the *sly*," he said and winked. "That would be very nice, thank you."

"You can just never tell anyone. It might displease my patron to learn that I had given away what he has paid so handsomely for."

"I understand," I said. "And now," I rose, drained what was left from my wine glass, and set it back on the table, "I must go. Like Elsinore, I, too, must get up early."

He had risen with me, and we shook hands. "I wish you well my friend, and that you were facing someone far friendlier than Spooky Ithunea tomorrow...like, say, the royal hangman."

8. IN WHICH I AM TESTED THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS

Early the next morning, I walked to what I had been shown the day before served as the royal schoolhouse. It consisted of a single chamber inside one of the Swiss chalet's wings, one whose three U-shaped sides semi-enclosed a cobblestone courtyard. At its center, a sculpted Nixie was continually splashed amidst a fountain's leaping waters.

The day was already warm. Upon entering the classroom, I immediately opened a window in the wall opposite the courtyard side. I looked out at the mist hanging low over the freshly mowed lawn and beyond, to the mountain that was part of the glacier-capped *Ormrheinen* range.

It formed a natural border with Aarastad's territory of Stuttesgarden in the east and the small Swiss nation of Gormr in the southeast. The glacier's occasional tremoring was attributed by local legend to the ice dragons Hallaeldari and Mundspel fighting within it.

Here and there upon the mountain rose small pillars of smoke from the camps, villages, and solitary homes of the local barbarians, the Undanuna.

I turned my back upon the picturesque scene and my thoughts to Princess Freyja and her peculiar condition.

Lord Melchior's account of her malady, that she was literally bewitched by an "Ymirdóttir" called "the Pallid Lady," was utterly fantastical! Yet, the regent himself was clearly a man of lucid mind. He had, in fact, been judged fit by the royal family to rule their kingdom *and* guide the fates of their two mentally troubled children who were their house's only hope.

Who remained to corroborate his story, or, more likely, give an alternate *realistic* account? Freyja's sister Asa's memories could scarcely be considered reliable, even *if* one could get an audience with her.

There was Freyja's old nurse, the only adult witness to whatever had really happened in the nursery that night. Was she still available for questioning?

And what of the mirror itself? Melchior had said nothing of its fate. Did it survive beyond those specks in Freyja's and her sister's eyes? Did he know? Did I dare ask?

I shook my head and reminded myself I was a stranger in this country. Best not to pry too deeply into secrets of state.

And yet....

...what would it all mean for the princess? Would Melchior really allow her to proclaim herself "the Ice Maiden, a daughter of Ymir" from the throne? How could she steer her own country if she became regarded both at home and abroad as mad? Yet, her ascension was the course her regent seemed intent

upon.

He seemed convinced a successful education was crucial in preparing her for her future role. I hoped to reach deeper than her intellect and stir her humanity. In fairy tale terms, I was the knight errant who longs to wake the sleeping princess beneath the glacier.

Practically speaking, I first had to gain her respect if I was going to help her at all. So far, I had only her interest and no idea why. Today, I had to take a firm grip on the reins of our student/teacher relationship if I were to do my part in disabusing her of her delusion.

So, what to do, I wondered as I unpacked the books from the box in which I had carried them to the classroom, which was a simple, long chamber. The first thing that I had noticed upon entering it for the first time was that the chalkboard was on the floor, not hanging on the wall.

Who, I wondered, had left it that way with classes for her future royal highness about to recommence? Months later I would learn the answer to that question as well as “why,” and most unexpected and life changing both the answers and the answerer would be indeed!

At the moment, though, I was focused on having the classroom ready when the princess arrived. I left my books and began examining how the board had been affixed to the wall. I lifted it and found that it was not so much its weight as its unwieldiness that made handling it difficult.

Then I realized the ‘board’ was, in fact, a large, long *slate*. I thought back to my previous evening’s conversation with Johan...and smiled.

Delayed by both my ruminations on Freyja’s condition and the preparations for my new scheme, I was still putting my books on the shelves when I heard Freyja arriving for her day’s lessons. I looked over my shoulder.

She wore a pale blue gown with a girdle whose silver spangles were in the patterns of enlarged snowflakes. Apparently, she was going for the full chilling effect for our initial outing. The hood of her light cloak was down, revealing the full basket weave of her blond hair. She was minus the falconer’s gloves. But then, there were no pigeons in the rafters. At least, not that I had noticed.

“Good morning, class,” I said and flashed her my cheeriest smile before returning to shelving. “Please, be seated.”

When I turned completely around, I found her seated at the far end of what was a very long table. She, of course, had to have noticed the chalkboard was missing. No longer simply not on the wall, it was nowhere to be seen. Of course, she would not deign to enquire regarding its absence.

Good. Just how I was counting on her royal-above-it-allness to respond.

“Comfortable?” I asked.

She nodded.

"Very well," I said and took my place at the other end of the table. "Let us pick up with some conjugation in the last language you were studying with your previous tutor. Do you recall what it was?"

Again, she nodded, and I shoved a small writing slate across that long table to her and rolled a piece of chalk after it.

She continued to stare at me for a few moments, then looked down, straightened the slate and took up the chalk. In her hand, the chalk began an intent, rapid *tackatackatack* over the slate.

I counted thirty seconds. Then: "Oh, and my lady?"

She stopped and looked up at me with narrowed eyes.

"I understand your inherent superiority as an elemental being of an elder race to my mere mortal self, of course..."

"It is well that you do."

"...but if you start that 'square root of the golden mean to infinity' nonsense up with me, there will be consequences. *Dire* consequences."

She startled, but quickly recovered and smugly construed her features.

"And would you care to explain these 'dire consequences,' schoolmaster?"

"I would. If you start writing out whatever the square root of the golden mean to infinity is supposed to be, you will copy it over and over until you have filled the slate."

She raised her chin and literally tried to look down her nose at me. "That is *all*?"

I never broke eye contact with her. "It will be plenty," I said.

"Hardly."

I let my gaze drop for a moment to what she held in her hand. "Not *that* slate, my lady," I said.

I held up a forefinger, and, as I ducked beneath the table, I saw her pale brow knit. She could only hear the sounds of my struggling with something unwieldy...

...then I was rising, pulling the large, long classroom chalkboard out from under the lengthy table between us.

She looked back and forth from that board to me, jaw slack, until I had finished placing it on the tabletop.

"*This* slate, my lady," I said. "I will position it before you where you sit, and you shall proceed to fill it, then erase it, then fill it, erase, fill, erase, fill, etc., etc. ..."

"...until you have covered this board *twenty times over* in your smallest hand with the square root of the golden mean to infinity."

“What?!”

“By which point I fully expect your little elemental fingers to be cramped, and your little elemental arse to have gone numb from its being stuck in that chair until you are done.”

Her wintry eyes stormed at me. “How *dare* you!”

“With great relish, my lady. That is my standard policy when daring: ‘with great relish.’”

Her upper lip curled, and she delivered the charge she’d clearly been waiting to spew at me: “*You* said you would *never* inflict upon my person corporal discipline to bring me under subjection!”

“*I said* that I would never *strike* you.” I raised my palms. “Have I threatened to lay a hand on your royal person? The thought of striking a woman is abhorrent to me, and since, as even *you* must acknowledge, you at least *look* to be female, my gentlemanly inclinations extend to even an ersatz example of womanhood such as yourself.

“Nor would I take any pleasure in seeing you experiencing discomfort from *any* enforced penalty of mine. *Ever*. But if you choose defiance, then due punishment is also *your* choice.

“Really, Princess Freyja. Do you think me such a fool as to leave myself unarmed with no means of discipline, especially in regard to a student who has labored so hard to establish herself as a little terror?”

Here she slightly tucked her chin and blush tinged her cheeks, but her glare at me was unabated.

“As a matter of fact,” I said, “*you* have already buffeted *me* repeatedly, just as much as if you had dealt the blows personally. While *I* have not even as much as raised a hand to you.

“Nevertheless, in my role as your instructor, I stand perfectly ready to deal out discipline most stringent if *you* make it necessary. And once begun, I shall not remit until it is *done*.”

Her mouth locked firmly and her stare remained unremittingly harsh, but I did not break my eye contact with her for one moment. She found that my blue eyes could be just as steely as her gray ones.

“Do not *try* me, Princess Freyja,” I said.

Still, she did not speak. I did, however, notice a slight tremor now and then in those tightly pressed lips.

I inclined my head toward her.

“My lady? Would you like to show me what you’ve been working on?”

She did not break our staring contest, but she *did* begin quickly wiping her slate clean.

Then, with an ostentatious smile that was more a smirk, she looked down and began *tackatackatacking* over her slate again.

She slid the slate to me across the larger one that now lay atop the table, creating an unpleasant screech that made me flinch in spite of myself.

“Languages,” she said, looking off to the side and staring into space. I took it up in my hand and looked at what she had written.

“Ah, French. It looks like you have done some verb conjugation.” I looked at her, smiled, then read:

*Je m'ennuie
Tu es ennuyant
Vous allez être ennuyant Nous serons ennuyés*

(Which, translated, is: “I am bored; you are boring; you will be boring; we will be bored”).

I placed the slate on the table, nodded at it, then began to erase. “I suppose that last one is the ‘*nous royale, mademoiselle?*”

Then I began to write, not that much, but I gave it some extra flourishes and erased a few times and rewrote just to stretch things out. I did catch her inclining her head forward at one point during my performance. Immediately, she straightened and frowned at me.

Setting my jaw to steel myself, I slid her slate back to her over the chalkboard in a manner that insured that the resulting screech was *more* unpleasant to hear as it returned. Oh, I *meant* for her to feel it in the quick of her teeth. Judging by her involuntary grimace, she did.

Returning her facial features to their smooth, detached expression, she would not give me the satisfaction of rushing to see my response, but continued to stare me in the eye even after it was under her hand. Finally, she looked down and read:

Si vous n'aimez pas mon pommes, pourquoi avez-vous secoué mon arbre?

(Which, translated, is: “If you don’t like my apples, why did you shake my tree?”)

Her face flew up from the slate, and she narrowed her eyes at me. “Must you seize *every* opportunity to throw that incident into my face, schoolmaster?”

“I am *not* pettily harping on her majesty’s poor behavior. But since *mademoiselle* seems to savor her *pommes du Norway*, and is well acquainted with how her personal Pict procures the fruit for her, I am certain she is able to receive the meaning of my question.

“Now, I speak English, Welsh, Latin, French, Scottish Gaelic, Swedish, German, Finnish, and your native Dano-Norwegian tongue. You may answer in any of those. Your choice. But you *will* answer my question, girl. Right. Now.”

“I...cannot.”

“Cannot or *will* not?”

"Cannot."

I stared at her, then expelled a puff of breath. "You are just being obstinate, my lady, is my estimate of it. Now you will answer me. Or, you can begin copying the square root of the golden mean to infinity two hundred times. Your choice."

At this ultimatum, her pale face flushed red, and she rose to her feet, dragging her chair loudly over the floor before heading for the door.

"*Freyja Ithunea Ifguter!*"

She stopped but did not turn around. I took a breath, then said,

"When your instructor asks you a question it is customary for the student to answer. If you find it impossible to abide by such a basic rule, and you continue to exit this room without first having received permission, another basic protocol, then do not come back to *my* classroom. Ever.

"I am already paid in full for six months, obligated only for one. If *you* call it off, then I presume I will be free immediately.

"Let me be clear: leaving you is *not* what I would prefer. I *prefer* to stay and do my part to prepare you to enjoy a successful reign. Whether you believe it or not, I am on your side.

"Your choice is your own, of course. However, be aware that this moment may well be the turning point of your life – of your *rule*. For if you will one day deal out discipline from the throne, you shall be unfit to do so unless you have first come under discipline yourself.

"Consider what I say before you take a step farther. And if your choice is to turn around and take your seat again, understand this: you may haunt this palace like a wraith, going about wherever you wish the rest of the day and night, but in this classroom, from eight in the morning until three in the afternoon, *I* am in authority, and you will do as you are told.

"Now, I asked you a question. If you find me such a bore, why did you bring me back yesterday?"

Her back was still turned toward me. I saw her release a deep breath and her shoulders relax.

"If that was what you wished to know, why did you not just ask me that at the first?"

"I did."

She turned on her heel and said, "You most assuredly did *not*. You dealt me a rebuke for having had Thule pelt you with apples."

"I employed a figure of speech instead of asking directly."

"I *loathe* figures of speech. You will please to address me straightforwardly henceforth. Simply say what you mean."

"Well, now I have. So, answer me."

She looked aside for a moment, sighed, then turned her face back to mine. "I...ask my instructor's permission to not answer that question. Not until...."

"Until....?"

"...until you have earned it."

"Oh?" I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs. "And how will I know that I have earned it?"

"I will inform you that you have."

"And if I don't earn it?"

"I will inform you of that also...with...with all due respect. Just before your services are terminated."

"But," I said, "recall that at the moment I am the one in authority here. You have asked my permission not to answer my question. What if I deny it?"

Her pale brow knitted and her eyes were as cutting as diamonds. "Why are you being difficult?"

"I am being difficult?"

"I asked politely, despite your inferior status even among your fellow human beings! It is one simple request. Grant me this, and I shall come under your discipline as my instructor."

Despite her haughty tone, I caught a note of pleading in her voice. Not that she would ever admit it, of course.

For a moment, I thought I saw that glint from the glass in her eye again, like a flare sent up in defiance from somewhere, or *something*, inside her...

...and then it was gone...

...and she was still standing before me, making herself vulnerable to another human being.

This was not the persona of the invulnerable Ice Maiden, the self-proclaimed, impassive force of nature, whom I had met yesterday.

Now I was getting a glimpse of the true Freyja Ithunea Ifguter Edelle Weiss.

Perhaps the first anyone had had in ten years.

"Listen," she said. "You do not wish me to fail my tests?"

"Of course not."

"Neither do I desire that you should fail yours. Now, will you grant my request?"

"I do," I said, exquisitely curious as to what exactly she was hoping for from me while feigning disinterest.

"Now," I said, "if my lady will return to her seat, we shall return to her lessons."

Very primly, she walked back to her chair and was seated. "Shall we continue with French conjugation?" she asked, looking down at the slate and erasing what I had written there.

"Will my lady not be bored?"

"She will. But she is at her schoolmaster's pleasure."

"And what other language would *she* prefer? What would be most useful to her in her daily society? That consists of those birds of yours...Ah, I know. A pidgin language."

"You should know that I despise puns with the same loathing I reserve for figures of speech and all forms of word play," she said.

"I am just trying to break the ice."

She glared at me.

I cleared my throat. "Do you happen to know the etymology of the word 'pidgin,' princess?"

"Instruct me. That is, I understand, for what I am paying you out of my royal coffers."

"There are two suggested origins. One is that it does derive from 'pigeon' after the communication style you employ. But it also appears related to the Chinese word for 'business,' and a pidgin language is indeed used for conducting business transactions among countries that have no common tongue.

"In fact, that's the origin of the *Russenorsk* still spoken on Aarastad's own New Sannikov by your future Pomor subjects. You know, the Russian migrants living off your coast on that island? The one with a live volcano and the mastodons? You heard about that, right?"

She crossed her arms over her breast, sighed, and leveled her gaze with mine. "Yes, I might have heard something about the live volcano and some living mastodons next door. What we *were* talking about, you might recall, was languages. It seems you know quite a few."

"I *am* conversant with other tongues..."

"Aren't we all?"

"...and possess a special command of *your* Dano-Norwegian."

She stared at me. Then, without blinking an eye: "Yes. I knew I'd heard about you. Didn't you compose a poem about a heroic goat?"

"It was a heroic *dog* named *Jöt*, okay?"

"I see that I was misinformed."

"And the dog was just the sidekick. The real hero was the Viking warrior, Dane 'White Fang' Dan Sven Jorgen."

"That's a mouthful."

"He goes by 'Denny.'"

"Oh."

"It's called *Upon a Fjord; Dying Young*. You should look it up."

"I shall make it a point to do so. So, tell me, schoolmaster, have you had opportunity to visit any of my kingdom's fjords?"

"Why, yes, I have. Last spring, I took a hiking tour of the same. I've always loved high coastal cliffs...particularly the view they afford."

"Stop it."

"And you know what else?"

"No, but I feel certain that you are about to enlighten me."

"I saw a whale while I was up there. Once. You know what it did? It flipped its tail at me. That's what it did."

"That was a fluke."

Her expression suggested that she had simply spoken matter-of-fact. Then, she began erasing her slate.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder...

Had the Ice Maiden who despised word play just made a pun?

9. INTRIGUE AT THE OKTOBER FESTIVAL

After this, things in the classroom quickly became routine.

Freyja's demeanor toward me as her teacher was always decidedly formal, but she was true to her word. She gave me all due respect and obeyed me. Well, she did as she was told, and she was polite enough, but that disagreeable streak in her had had years to wear in deep, and it could not help but show at times.

Mostly, she kept her distance, figuratively and literally, at the far end of that long table.

Outside the classroom, we did not, of course, socialize. I did see her about on occasion, but always in the margins of things. Sometimes, though, not *that* far away, as though she wanted to be certain I knew she was there. However, she never approached me, and I thought it prudent to follow her lead.

In class, she was a good student and worked hard in those subjects with which she had had difficulty for years. In those in which she had always demonstrated aptitude, such as the natural sciences, mathematics, and languages, she excelled. In the former category was poetry, particularly British metaphysical poetry with its double-entendres, conceits, punning and ironies. That happened to be my favorite genre, and, when I expressed this to be the case, she wasted no time in reminding me how much she loathed word play.

So, it was "tip-me-over-with-a-feather" time when metaphysical poetry was the only subject that she ever requested to stay after school to study more extensively.

Of course, I was all too happy to grant her the favor, but I found it most odd, for as we went along, it was clear she was not gaining any appreciation, let alone a love for it. Yet she stuck doggedly to it, ready to keep trying as long as I was to teach.

At any rate, we were now several months into her studies, and I apparently had yet to fail whatever this mysterious test of hers was.

Then, on Oktober 3, 1844, the last day of the summer palace Oktober Festival, there was a sign that my relationship with the princess was headed for a turn, though the event itself would not occur until over a month later.

Elsinore, as kitchen staff, could not be with Johan and me to enjoy the palace-sponsored festivities that day. Thus, part of the pleasure, as an exclusively boys' society, meant we were free to openly share our admiration for all the pretty young women about us.

I welcomed the change of pace of a public celebration filled with beautiful girls, good food and drink, and a friend at my side with whom to enjoy it all.

Normally, my afternoons were spent trying to work up a new poem, and losing all faith in my ability,

or touring alone the palace grounds to study its eclectic architecture, such as the Muscovite style bell tower from which had pealed the announcement that the festival was open for the day.

That particular bell tower's design was not due to Queen Ealathoune, but the Russian influence on Aarastad's high society from the nearby Pomor settlements. Which was also why *buzhenina* and *borscht* were being served alongside *flæskesteg* and *farikal* at the palace celebration that day.

The Muscovite bell tower was normally used to summon worshippers every Sunday to the nearby Bohemian style stave church of the local Moravian congregation. It had been built after King Lothar ordered the original palace chapel remain sealed.

With the later appointment of a former itinerant preacher to the Undanuna and Sami as pastor, the freestanding chapel also became the parish church. The parson's name was Munnin Woanaz, and he had held that honorable position for nearly two decades when I arrived.

His daughters, Amelia and Molly, would be favoring the day's festival attendees with a display of Victorian ladies' style bare-knuckle boxing. They performed under their *noms de guerre* "Mjollnir" and "Maul," and at ages thirteen and twelve, respectively, were already seasoned veterans of the ring, having been coached in the genteel art of pummeling each other since infancy by their reverend father.

The epitome of the current Victorian *cause celebre*, "the athletic Christian," Reverend Munnin Woanaz was quite the pugilist himself, trim and physically robust. In contrast, his high forehead, slightly sunken cheeks, and pale complexion were those of a scholar. Indeed, his blue, penetrating eyes evidenced a keen, analytical mind. This was a man in whom both sense and sensibility were equally wed.

As I had listened to him from the pulpit one Sunday, I realized his name, though inappropriately pagan for a Christian minister, could not have described him more perfectly than if he had chosen it himself.

With the advantage of hindsight, I am now chagrined that I never considered the possibility that he *had* done just that. But then, in my early days at the summer palace, I had no reason to suspect Reverend Munnin Woanaz was anything more than he appeared to be.

His striking spouse Emily was British, statuesque and auburn haired, with high cheekbones, bright, inquisitive eyes, and a stunning smile. Despite birthing two children, she appeared to have reclaimed every inch of her schoolgirl figure. She was, in fact, as fit as her husband.

The twinkle in their eyes when they looked at each other, and the frequency with which she found opportunity just to briefly touch him in public, made it clear, to this observer at least, that the minister and his wife had found a disciplined physical regime a way to keep harmonizing to the *Song of Solomon* on into midlife.

Now, although I eschew vain popularity, I confess to enjoying the smiles I received at that Oktober Festival from pretty girls, whom I knew, except for my appointment as royal tutor, would have never taken notice of me.

As I smiled back at these various and sundry flirtatious beauties, I saw Freyja standing on the raised porch Johan and I had recently crossed in exiting the palace.

I had no indication that she had taken any special notice of my being there.

She appeared to be concentrating on staring out over her future subjects.

The milling about of human beings in mundane social interaction could not possibly hold *her* attention for long. So, as with all the previous times I had seen her this closely in public, I did not expect she would be lingering.

I turned my attention back to the feigned smiles. What of it? The girls were lovely, and I was warm with the afternoon sun, beer, and a good friend's company.

Suddenly, I was aware of Johan's voice so close his breath was brushing my ear. I started to turn to him...

"No, don't!" he said. "Look back in the direction you were. Now, do you see a pretty girl?"

"Plenty," I said.

"Smile at her just like you've been doing...no. She can't see through the back of your head, that's not enough."

"'She?' Who? Bodil?"

"No, *not* 'Bodil.' Raise your hand and wave at any pretty girl you might see. Do it!"

I smiled and waved.

"Are you being ostentatious?"

"Not particularly."

"Put some more *ostentation* into it, man! Get the whole arm up there!"

I waved broadly at the girl as though I were on the balcony on the evening of my coronation day.

"I feel not unlike a fool," I said to Johan out of the corner of my mouth while maintaining my smile. The young lady, however, did match my wave with equal emphasis.

"Ha!" he said. "I dare say she didn't like *that*."

"What do you mean 'didn't like it?' She was smiling and waving back."

"Not that wench. Spooky Ithunea."

"*What?*"

I turned and craned my neck to look beyond him. Freyja was no longer on the raised porch.

I looked over the nearby grounds and saw no females I recognized except Reverend Woanaz's wife Emily, who was ringside with her husband as their daughters boxed. She was looking in my direction and smiled pleasantly when my eyes met hers.

I smiled back and nodded at the pastor's wife, then continued looking for Freyja. "Where? Where is she?"

"Oh, she's gone now."

"Long gone, I'd say, to judge by her past behavior."

"No, she *just* left with her nose stuck in the air when she saw you shamelessly waving at that other girl. You *cad*."

"You mean you were egging me on to flirt with that girl for *Freyja's* benefit? Why on earth do you think she would care?"

"Oh, she cared. I have no idea why, of course. I only know that she had been watching you like a hawk from the moment she stepped out on that porch."

"No. You're wrong. When I looked at her, she didn't even notice I was here."

"Well, that's what she wanted you to think."

"She was looking over there," I said and stabbed in the direction I'd seen her surveying.

"Only when she knew you were looking."

"And you had me flirt with that other girl to see if she'd be jealous?"

"Oh, she *was* jealous. She did not like it one bit. Trust me. The woman doesn't exist who isn't an open book to me. I can read 'em a mile away and know *exactly* what page they are on. Sometimes, the exact sentence."

"Listen," I said. "That girl has no interest in me outside the classroom."

"Yes, let us talk about the classroom. The *classroom*...from what you tell me, she has conspired to keep you there, with her, beyond the allotted time."

"There is no 'conspiracy' on her part. I have come to understand the princess is all very, well, frank. So, I have no doubt that she was nothing less than sincere when she expressed her wish to increase her understanding of the metaphysical poets."

He winced. "Oh, come now, young man. Who has *ever*, since the end of the seventeenth century, requested an encore of metaphysical poetry because she actually wanted to hear the stuff?"

"Besides, no woman is ever so up front as that with a man, not one she's interested in at least."

I laughed and pointed at myself. "Interested in *me*? She's not even capable of being interested in the entire human *race*! And even less capable of being part of it."

He shrugged. "She's possessive of you."

"So, she's supposed to be in love with me, now? You got all that from what little bit you just saw...and at *this* distance?"

"No, now," he said, "I didn't say she wants you for her lover, but she certainly doesn't want anybody else to have you in that regard, either. She wants you all to herself, *for herself*, for *some* purpose, though. That look in her eyes said she will brook no distractions. She is *definitely* a woman with a plan."

I shook my head and grinned. "So now she has plans for me?"

Now, I had not spoken to either him or Elsie about Freyja's having some, well, *hope* of me, for the princess herself was guarded about it, and, out of respect, I felt that I should be, too.

So, yes, she had something on her mind concerning me, but it involved some sort of *scheme*? Court intrigue? *That* notion was all rather a bit much, I thought as I pulled my watch from my vest pocket to check the time...

...and a piece of folded paper came out with it and fluttered to the ground.

"You dropped something," Johan remarked absently, stroking his bearded chin. "Well, maybe not plans 'for you,'" he said as I bent to recover the slip of paper that I did not remember putting in my pocket, "but she has plans, and you're a part of them. A part she doesn't wish to see compromised."

I unfolded the paper as I rose...

...and saw this:



I began craning my neck this way and that, visually sweeping the crowd. I made no effort to be subtle about it.

"What's the matter?" Johan said. He grinned and reached for the piece of paper. "Did some secret love slip you a note?"

I yanked it away, and Johan only grabbed the air.

"I was looking for that girl I was waving at," I said, my smile as false as my words as I slipped the note back into my vest pocket along with my watch.

"That was a missive from *her*? Well, well, young man. What *have* you been up to?"

"Nothing like that," I said. "It's just that..."

"Yes?"

I grinned. "If Freyja is as bent on having me all to herself as you say, I was suddenly worried for that girl's safety and was hoping to see that she was all right."

"I daresay it will not come to that," he said. "But my advice to you is, be careful about disappointing her. Remember, this is 'Spooky Ithunea' we're talking about. She might turn you into a toad or something. That could be dreadfully inconvenient."

"I appreciate your concern for my welfare."

"Bosh! Totally in my own self-interest. I and my Elsie have come to enjoy your company, and neither of us would wish to see you so...dismissed."

We laughed, he slapped my shoulder, and we returned to our moderate carousing.

But all the time, my mind was distracted by the appearance in my pocket of the same rune that had been carved into the palace chapel wall along with a vow of vengeance.

What did it all mean? Surely, it could *not* mean that *I* had been marked as the object of said promised vengeance. I was not only *not* in Aarastad at the time of Ealathoune's death, I was but a babe!

No, someone was trying to communicate something else to me related to the rune. All that I could think of was that they knew that I had seen the carved Inguz in the archive.

Had this individual, also? Or, was *he* the mystery donor? Did he think I might know the secret of Ealathoune's death? Or was he reaching out, hoping to share that secret with me?

Or was *she*?

Freyja had been at the festival, watching me "like a hawk," to quote Johan. Secretly watching me. Had she been wanting to see my reaction to what was drawn on that paper? Had she gotten it in my pocket somehow?

The fact was that something *had* made her call me back after both she and Lord Melchior had dismissed me. If not exactly 'plans' as Johan thought, she did have some...well, as I said, some *hope* of me. What that was, I still had no idea, nor any notion of what her 'test' was that I was undergoing.

Or, if it had anything to do with the drawing, slipped into my pocket, of the Inguz modified to commemorate Ealathoune's death.