

The Ice Queen

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Once upon a time there was a young princess with long golden blond hair and misty gray-blue eyes. All reckoned that she would be a great beauty when she was grown, and she charmed all who knew her with her sunny disposition, her wide-eyed enthusiasm for whatever opportunities life brought her and her kind gentle nature. This seemed all the more remarkable because she suffered a crushing loss at birth, for her mother, then the Queen, perished in childbirth. She was her mother's only child. The King soon remarried to a princess from a neighboring kingdom, helping to insure peace between these two kingdoms that had warred in the past. As the Queen was chosen for reasons of state, it was not unusual that the new Queen was only twelve years old, but this did mean that she could not for some years yet truly become the King's wife and bear his children. When the princess was seven the new Queen gave birth to a son, and scarcely a year later give birth to boy twins. All three boys thrived, and of course, these boys displaced the older princess from her dubious position as heir, seemingly insuring a peaceful succession when the day of the King's death should come.

The eldest son was given into the care of the nurse that had raised the princess, and further nurses were needed when the twins were born. All these nurses had general responsibility for the princess's care, but the much younger princes demanded most of their attention. As her brothers were so much younger, she had no other children for her playmates, so she instead spent her time in the company of castle servants or in solitary pursuits. She would choose some servant, man or woman, and watch them closely for a while as they worked, then strike up a conversation with them. She won the love of many with her enthusiasm, curiosity and charming ways. When the princess was late for a meal or bedtime she would often be found in earnest conversation with the most unlikely people. She might be helping an old peasant woman spread manure in the kitchen gardens, or she might be seated beside a

hulking battle-scarred palace guardsman discussing which flowers smelled nicest and where the animals went in the wintertime.

The princess loved nature, and though we have said she spent time in solitary pursuits, it would be truer to say that she spent time in the company of nature. She felt at home in a meadow, lying in the tall grass watching the bees and butterflies, and turning over rocks to see if scurrying ants or a few almost imperceptibly moving snails lay beneath, and she also loved to sit on a rock or stump in the forest, watching how the shadows of the leaves danced with each breeze, listening to the rustle of leaves and the chirping of birds, and smelling the damp fresh smell of the forest floor. It was the Princess's way with animals that most clearly showed her kind and giving nature. She would often slip away during mealtime, and when a servant was sent to fetch her, she would be found outside feeding the animals with food from her plate. She might feed bread to the birds or even bits of meat to spiders. Once in winter she forgot to put on her warm cloak before going out, and she was found shivering, with lips blue from the cold, feeding nuts to chipmunks. Yet so intent was she on her goal that she seemed almost unaware of her discomfort. Feeding the animals was a wonderful way to attract them for close study, but she also talked to them much as she talked to her equally unlikely human companions, and likewise won the affections of many furry or feathered creatures. She seemed take pleasure in the knowledge that in giving a small creature a morsel from her plate she was giving that creature a great feast that might sustain it in difficult times.

So it was in company of servants and of nature that the princess spent her growing years. When she was 12 there was a royal progress, where the King, Queen and entire court traveled throughout the lands, holding court in the palaces of each of his lords. The King could then survey with his own eyes how things went and could more powerfully assert his authority over his vassals. In addition, this was an opportunity to present the boy princes to the kingdom, for the oldest was now 5. In that day the

great forests had not yet been cleared. Settlements were small and separated by miles of largely unpopulated forest. In a day's travel it was common to see no sign of human presence other than the tracks on the path itself and the occasional crude hut of a woodcutter.

Of course, the princess rode side-saddle, so she could not use stirrups or reins, and might as well have been a sack of provisions as far as the horse was concerned. The horse was well trained, and knew its place in the procession, so it didn't require any servant to lead it, but would simply plod ahead whenever the great train of horses and wagons lurched into motion. After some days of this sort of travel, the procession had stopped for the midday meal. The princess's butt hurt from the ceaseless lurching and bouncing, and her legs were stiff, so she decided to go for a walk. Once the princess was in the forest she became fascinated by the subtle differences between this forest and her own home forest. She recognized all the types of trees, but the mix was different, and there were small wildflowers and beetles she had never seen before. The very ground itself was a different color, and smelled slightly different.

She explored for some time before her stomach told her it was well past mealtime, and she had best return to the procession. At first she was disoriented, and felt a moment of panic when she thought she was lost. But she had so closely observed her progress through the forest that she found she could retrace her path by various landmarks, a large tree or a tiny mushroom. She was much relieved when she regained sight of the road, but on crashing through the last brambles at the forest edge, she found that she was entirely alone. The procession had left without her.

The princess's horse stupidly plodded in its assigned position, and it was not until the procession stopped to set up camp in the early evening that anyone noticed the saddle was empty. The King sent back a company of riders to retrace their path in search of the princess, but none knew where in the miles of wilderness the princess had been lost, so the only hope was that the princess would be found

waiting beside the trail. But this hope was in vain, for the princess didn't understand the seriousness of her predicament and the importance of remaining by the trail. Although she was somewhat dazed by this unexpected turn of events, she was well used to being alone in the forest, and was not greatly concerned. She had missed the midday meal, so her greatest concern was her grumbling stomach. She recalled where she had seen a patch of blackberries and also some mushrooms that she knew to be edible, for she had once followed and befriended a peasant woman who gathered mushrooms. So she set off to find her meal, and once she satisfied her hunger she lay down in the clearing where the mushrooms grew. The sun was warm and she was tired from all her hiking, so she soon fell asleep.

When she woke it was late afternoon. Her nap cleared her mind greatly, and as she thought on her situation she came to realize that she was alone in a way she had never been before. She had taken the palace servants for granted; she had so many friends among them that she had never considered the possibility none might be there to take her inside when she was cold or feed her when she was hungry. She thought on the gruff guardsman who had so many times let her ride on his back as he brought her back to the castle so that the gates could be shut for the night. She thought on the friendly woman-cook in the kitchens who would treat her to sweet dried fruits and give her stale bread to feed to the birds.

Without knowing it she had depended on their kindness much more vitally than her animal friends depended on the feasts she set before them---they were born with both the tools and habits to survive in the wild; she was not. This understanding came over her not as a sudden wave of panic, but rather as a gradually crushing vise loneliness, self-pity and despair. First her eyes filled with tears, then she began to sob, and finally she lay curled in a ball on the ground shaking with fear as well as sobbing and whimpering. In a half-hour she had reached the deepest despair, but this could not be sustained, and by the time an hour had passed her tears were spent, her loneliness and despair were transformed to a general blankness, and though fear remained as an icy knot in her gut, her trembling was now more

from the growing chill that evening brought with it.

She was desperate, yes, but emotional collapse was past. Instead she was filled with that strange clear calm that instinctively comes when it is needed, when there is mortal peril. She now realized that her best hope was to return to the path and wait for rescue, if not from the royal party, then from some other passer-by. She rose and began to walk toward the path that led back to the road, but then an old man appeared walking up that same path. She ran up to him, and as she approached she saw that he was heavily burdened with a pack and his clothes were little better than rags. She continued to run up to him, but abruptly stopped five paces short and began to wring her hands. If his appearance had been ordinary or if he had shown any of the signs of warmth or concern that she expected, then she would likely have thrown her arms around him, even though she knew him not. But he seemed blind in one eye, his face was scarred, his body somehow twisted, and his manner . . . wrong.

The princess was instinctively afraid of this ominous stranger, but her need was great, and also she knew from experience that the poor and deformed often showed kindness far out of proportion to their limited means, and that men who at first seemed hard and frightening often showed a kind heart once she had worked her charm on them. Her understanding that appearances can be deceiving was wise beyond her years, but she was innocent. The worst she had ever known was irritated brusque rejection, and she knew this was painful, for the tears would swell in her eyes, and she would have to suddenly turn away and run off to find a private place to cry before she caved in completely, a place where she could lie undisturbed, curled and sobbing, until the feeling passed. She knew the pain of rejection, but she did not know what real evil was. She did not know that a horrific appearance could tell the truth.

The princess said “Kind sir, I am lost and cold and hungry, and I do not know what to do. Could you help me?” The man paused a moment before responding, as any man might when confronted by such a surprise, but he was not actually surprised. Instead he groped for the words that he should say to win

her trust and struggled to recall how a kind voice sounded so that he might mimic it. For though he could easily overpower the girl, this would not suit his purpose. He must win her trust. He said “Of course I will help you little girl, but how did you come to be out here all alone? Where are your parents?” The princess always spoke with innocent direct intimacy, and her relief was so great that her voice shook with gratitude “I am so relieved. I feared I would die out here.” She then gave her most winning smile, but fearful uncertainty made her smile quavery.

The princess then explained how she came to be there, and as she told her brief sad tale, tears ran down her cheeks, but she did not give in to sobs. Any normal man who had heard the poor sweet girl's plea for help and seen how she cried and shivered would have immediately taken her in his arms, and had he done this she would have sobbed like a baby, but if the man had ever known how to comfort a crying child, he had forgotten. Instead, the princess ended her story still holding onto the composure of a young woman in distress, still standing three paces away with hands clasped.

The man said “Well, that is a sad tale, and you were wise to be frightened, but we can easily set things aright. You are fortunate indeed that I found you, for nobody lives anywhere near. I am a poor wanderer and a hermit who earns some coin cutting wood, but I live mainly off of the woods, eating what food I gather and small game I take.” This story made enough sense that the princess accepted it, for it explained both his presence here and his cold manner. A man who chose to be a hermit presumably found human company to be in some way bothersome.

The man said that they should sleep there that night, and then in the morning go down to the road and walk toward the nearest town. Likely they would run into some traveler who could carry the girl to town on his horse, and even if not they could make it in three days walk. Once in town it would be a small matter form up a party that would carry the girl on ahead and reunite her with her family. It would take only a few days to overtake the slow-moving royal progress. He gave her his heavy

traveler's cloak to warm her, fed her with bread and cheese, and gave her water to drink. The princess then slumped with exhaustion, so he wrapped her snugly in the cloak, and told her that she was safe now, and she should sleep.

The princess quickly fell into a sound sleep. The man sat looking at her, his thoughts unguessable. The sun set, dusk faded, and all was dark. Then the moon rose, and the clearing was bathed in cold light. The man stirred then, removing something from his pack, then kneeling above the girl, straddling her slight body between his spread knees. He opened the cloak where it covered her chest, then unfastened her dress, exposing her bare chest, which seemed white in the light of the moon.

He then unwrapped the object he held, revealing a wavery tapered transparent spike, an icicle, but one with a strange internal blue glow. He held the icicle with the cloth to protect his hands and raised it high over the girl's chest. He then paused. Perhaps some shred of human decency stayed his hand when he looked on the innocent sleeping face of this girl who had placed herself in his care, her utter vulnerability made clear by her bare chest. But the the girl began to waken from the cold air on her skin. Her eyes opened, then she gasped, her eyes wide in shocked incomprehension. Her waking prompted the man to complete the violent downward thrust that he had poised himself to deliver. The princess began a scream as the icicle pierced her chest, but no sound passed her lips, for her heart was pierced through.

The man then broke off the extra part of the strange icicle that had served as a hilt and used the cloth to push the exposed stub inside the girl's chest. The only remaining sign of the horrible violence was the girl's frozen scream and a small puddle of blood in the middle of her naked chest, right between her breasts that had so recently been budding. The man roughly pulled the cloak off the girl, wrapped himself in it, and went to sleep.

The blood looked black in the moonlight. Nobody would be surprised that the girl's heart was stilled

when so pierced, nor surprised that her breathing stopped with her heart, nor surprised that her body lay entirely still, nor surprised that her bare flesh became cold to the touch as it lay exposed to the night air. But only the sleeping man would have been unsurprised to see how frost began to form on her skin and how an icy blue glow suffused the pupils of her innocent gray-blue eyes. The true horror only became clear when the light of dawn fell upon her, for then the girl woke, even though her heart no longer beat and no breath moved her chest and her skin was as cold as ice, as white as snow. But we can no longer call her a girl, for she had become the Ice Queen. Her face settled into an expression of cold disdain. She sat up, refastened her dress, and surveyed the scene. Satisfied, she sat frozen until the man awoke.

Of course, the man was not a hermit. He was powerful wizard, and also a cruel tyrant who ruled by fear. We shall call him the evil wizard, for by the time the man did this horrible deed we may confidently say that he was evil, but he was not born that way, for none are born evil. He was, however, born with two fatal flaws in his character, either one of which was sufficient to insure that he would live a miserable, hurtful life: he was a coward, and he had no caring for his fellow man. It was worse fortune that he was born to cruel parents in a terrible time. Yet in this world many suffer similar character flaws and misfortunes, but merely become loathsome cruel people, much like the boy's parents, or common criminals. It was not these all-too-common weaknesses that made him into a man who loosed terror on the land, slaying countless thousands. Instead, his strengths were the rock that horrible fate grew from: a penetrating and wide-ranging intelligence and a talent for magic rare even among wizards.

Cowardice was his worst flaw, for the only way he could respond to his horrible situation was with fear. It is understandable, and indeed prudent for a child to feel fear in response to the constant threat of pointless cruelty from his parents and the incomprehensible fact of war, but many suffer these fates

with a bravery and hopefulness that allows them keep their kind feelings, and not always live in fear. This boy was born afraid and grew up in fear. When he became a fearful young man, he resolved to protect himself by becoming a wizard. With his intelligence and talent, some success as a wizard was assured, but it was his panic-stricken exertion that caused him to become a great wizard.

It was then that his lack of caring became crucial, for he cared not how many he harmed or how grievously he harmed them. His only concern was his self-preservation, for he was terrified of dying. It was this that drove him to overthrow the king and become a tyrant who ruled by fear rather than loyalty, and then to war ceaselessly with the surrounding kingdoms. His magic was not powerful enough to win battles, but it was quite sufficient to create terrible fear. If a petitioner in court displeased him, he might compel him to gnaw off his own hand. The victim's agony ended only when he bit his artery and bled to death. This application of magic to evil ends had a cost on the wizard's body, twisting and diminishing it. Some magical experiments also failed dangerously, such as when the daemon tore out his eye and scarred his face.

In his magical research he learned that his lack of a Queen weakened his magic, and if he only had the right Queen then his magic would be increased tenfold. No natural woman would suffice, but with the right materials he could create what he needed: the Ice Queen. One of those necessary materials was an innocent trusting young girl, not yet quite a woman. It was only a cruel irony that his magical search for the needed girl in a vulnerable circumstance happened to lead him to an actual princess. Any innocent girl would have sufficed, for a princess is not so different from other girls.

When the evil wizard woke and saw that his Ice Queen awaited him, he was filled with an unfamiliar sensation of not-fear, almost what one might call hope. He called up a daemon to whisk them to his palace, and he commanded the priests to marry them that very morning so that she became his powerful

magical talisman. When the company of searchers that had been sent to rescue the princess rode down the vacant stretch of road where she had been abandoned, she was miles away, her fate sealed.

The Ice Queen did not breathe, yet she had a harsh, chilling voice that sounded like the whistling of the winter wind and the cracking of ice. The Ice Queen did not eat, yet she continued to grow and mature as a living girl would, in time taking on the appearance beautiful cruel woman. The wound on her chest never entirely healed, but the blood turned to an ordinary scab. Even when she became a woman the evil wizard never consummated his marriage to the Ice Queen, for he feared that any children he sired might become wizards that would challenge him. It is noteworthy that such was the evil wizard's fear that it overwhelmed not only the gentle longing for children, but that most powerful passion, Lust. He may well have been right in fearing to have children; it is certainly best that he had none, and best that he did not violate the poor princess's body any further.

At first the Ice Queen did little, for she had no will of her own, and the evil wizard gave her no commands. Instead, he applied his powerful new magic to calling up vast dragons and other terrible daemons from the pits of hell to lay waste to surrounding kingdoms and rebellious provinces. But he found that the Ice Queen was more perfectly free of caring than even he, so he soon came to delegate to her such unpleasant but necessary duties as the execution of captives. When the constant strife caused a great persistent famine, he set her the task of leading foraging parties into the countryside to steal the food from starving peasants so that he and his armies could eat. Though he did not understand why, sometimes the wizard slept poorly after doing such things, so it was a relief to leave these things to the Ice Queen. In this way the Ice Queen took on the evil wizard's goal of suppressing enemies, bringing to it her own icy ruthlessness.

Fortunately the evil wizard was already old when he took his Ice Queen, and the death he so feared

came to him as it does to all men. The tale does not tell how he died, and it matters little. Perhaps he died in his sleep, perhaps he choked on a bone when eating a stew made from some poor peasant's only laying hen.

After the evil wizard's death the people obeyed the Ice Queen, for the wizard had strived to make them always fearful, as he himself was. Also, the Ice Queen was terrible to behold, and she had been the one who commanded the greatest atrocities. But in time, bravery led some to test the Ice Queen, and hope grew, for it became clear that she had no magic of her own. Her power depended entirely on the obedience of the very people she had so abused. After this knowledge rippled through the kingdom for a year, and disobedience went unpunished in the provinces, there came a day when a great crowd formed about the palace and began to scream for justice. The palace guards simply threw the gates open and let the mob have their way with the Ice Queen. They seized her, bore her out of the palace, and threw her off the cliffs that protected the back of the palace from attack. She gave one last icy scream of rage before being silenced when she was dashed against the rocks, then her falling form was lost from sight as it bounced and tumbled to the coastal plain far below.

There she lay sprawled at the foot of the cliffs. Though battered by the fall, she was still in one piece, and she could not be said to have died, for her heart had not beaten since it had been pierced ten years before, and she could not perish from the cold, for she was ice already, and she could neither starve nor die of thirst because the Ice Queen neither ate nor drank. She was well-preserved.

But a close examination would show that in the violence of the fall, the scab on her chest had broken open, and a stub of the icicle now protruded. Occasionally a drop of red blood would ooze out. This loosening of the icicle also partly freed the princess from her evil transformation. In her mind she was once again the princess, her pupils returned to their original misty gray-blue, and she could move her

eyes as she chose, but that was all she could do. She could not even blink. She remembered her childhood in the company of servants and animals, she remembered how she had become lost in the woods, she remembered the odd man who rescued her, she remembered how, in that clearing, under the light of the moon, she had woken *into* a nightmare rather than waking *from* one. She remembered every moment of that ten-year nightmare. She remembered the horror of life in that evil kingdom, and worst of all, she remembered the terrible acts of evil she herself had commanded. When she thought of the terrible things she had endured, the terrible things she had done, and the hellish torment of her current part-frozen state, she was very sad. As she lay frozen in her sadness, she found another way in which her humanity had been partially restored, for every so often a icy tear would form in her eye and run down her cheek before freezing on the ground.

She lay in this unendurable condition for an intolerable time, weeks probably. If it was in her power, she would have killed herself to stop the suffering, but it was not in her power, for she was utterly helpless. Jackals and vultures sniffed at her, but decided she was not fit to eat. Sometimes she saw a cart pass by on the road that lay perhaps 30 paces from the cliff-face, but she could not call out for help. So the time passed.

Then a wandering prince rode by. He was in no great hurry, for he was on a quest to seek his fortune, and there was no telling where he might find it. He looked around as his horse plodded along, and he spied an odd white shape atop the tumbled rocks at the foot of the cliffs. He rode off the trail and saw it seemed to be a bundle of fabric. It was only when he had scrambled up the rocks that he saw that it was a woman's dress, and a woman's body was wrapped in it. He ran over, but when he touched her he knew that she was long dead, for her skin was as cold as ice. She had no breath or heartbeat either. Yet he had seen dead bodies before, and this was different. The dress was soaked with blood where it lay on her chest, but the blood was still red and fresh, though ice-cold. And her head lay in a puddle of

ice. This was the princess's frozen tears, but he did not know that. Of course, it was when he met the princess's eyes that he had his greatest surprise, for when he saw that her eyes moved and that she looked at him pleadingly, and that a tear rolled down her cheek, he knew that she was in some sense alive, and that evil magic possessed her.

Though he wasn't sure that it was proper that he should do so, he opened her dress to see the wound that caused her bleeding. When he saw the evilly glowing icicle protruding between her breasts he knew that it was not right, so he grasped the icicle using his handkerchief, plucked it out and threw it aside. Warm red blood began to pulse from the opened wound, for her heart had once again begun to beat. He stanchd the bleeding with the palm of his hand. Soon her chest began to quiver and she made small moaning sounds that became weak gasping panting, and her eyes filled with panic, for now that her heart beat again, she needed to breathe, but her lungs were still frozen. The prince guessed that she labored to breathe, so he placed his lips on hers and breathed his own warm breath into her lungs, repeating this a dozen times until she breathed easily. Now she shivered with cold, and some color began to return to her icy white skin. He held her in his lap, cradled her in his arms, and wrapped his cloak around the two of them so that he could give his warmth to her. Slowly her shivering eased, then she began to sob as a twelve-year-old girl might when she is lost in the forest and a kind stranger embraces her, or perhaps as a twenty-two year old woman might if she had endured unspeakable horror, then was rescued by a kind stranger.

After some time the princess's sobs faded and she regained the power of speech. The prince and princess talked, introducing themselves and saying something of their lives. But the princess could not bear to say what torment she had endured or how it was that she came to lie frozen in that place. The prince knew it was just this sort of fortune that princes went to seek, so he asked her to marry him. And besides, she was beautiful, and now warm, and lying next to him. She said yes immediately, for after

so much coldness she could not bear the thought of ever being out of his warm embrace. And besides, as well as being her savior, he was exactly the sort of prince she had always imagined she would marry. So they lay together that night, and every night thereafter as they began the long journey back to the prince's land.

As a younger son, the prince would never become king, but he was given a small yet fruitful barony to rule, and there he lived happily ever after with his beautiful blond wife, whose gray-blue eyes spoke both of innocent kindness and unspeakable horror. After her ordeal the baroness still kept the princess's open warm manner, kindness and of love of nature, but she never regained her former sunny optimism and easy trust, instead adopting an attitude that one might call loving determination. She bore her husband many children, and she always knew where they were.