

"Cold" section 2  
Choosing a mate

Princesses, also, are expected to marry. They are expected to marry for dynastic reasons, to cement an alliance, to placate a powerful rival, to bear royal heirs. They are, in the old stories, gifts and rewards, handed over by their loving fathers to heroes and adventurers who must undergo trials, or save people. It would appear, Fiammarosa had thought as a young girl, reading both histories and wonder tales, that princesses are commodities. But also, in the same histories and tales, it can be seen that this is not so. Princesses are captious and clever choosers. They tempt and test their suitors, they sit like spiders inside walls adorned with the skulls of the unsuccessful, they require super-human feats of strength and cunning from their suitors, and are not above helping out, or weeping over, those who appeal to their hearts. They follow

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their chosen lovers through rough deserts, and ocean tempests, they ride on the wings of the north wind and enlist the help of ants and eagles, trout and mice, hares and ducks, to rescue these suddenly helpless husbands from the clutches of scheming witches, or ogre-kings. They do have, in real life, the power to reject and some power to choose. They are wooed. She had considered her own cold heart in this context and had thought that she would do better, ideally, to remain unmarried. She was too happy alone to make a good bride. She could not think out a course of action entirely but had vaguely decided upon a course of prevarication and intimidation, if suitors presented themselves. For their own sakes, as much as for her own. She was sorry, in the abstract — she thought a great deal in the abstract, it suited her — for anyone who should love her, or think it a good idea to love her. She did not believe she was truly lovable. Beside her parents, and her brothers, whose love was automatic and unseeing, the only person who truly loved her was Hugh. And her cold eye, and her cold mind, had measured the gulf between what Hugh felt for her and what she felt for him.

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She tried never to let it show; she was grateful, his company was comfortable to her. But both he and she were intelligent beings, and both knew how things stood.

The King had his own ideas, which he believed were wise and subtle, about all this. He believed his daughter needed to marry more than most women. He believed she needed to be softened and opened to the world, that she had inherited from the unsatisfactory icewoman a dangerous, brittle edge which would hurt her more than anyone else. He believed it would be good for his daughter to be melted smooth, though he did not, in his thinking, push this metaphor too far. He had a mental image of an icicle running with water, not of an absent icicle and a warm, formless pool. He thought the sensible thing would be to marry this cold creature to a prince from the icelands from which the original Fror had been snatched by King Beriman, and he sent letters to Prince Boris, beyond the mountains, with a sample of his daughter's weaving, and a painting of her white beauty, her fine bones, blue eyes and cool gold hair. He was a great

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believer in protocol, and protocol had always, at these times, meant that the picture and the invitation must go to many princes, and not only one. There must be a feast, and something of a competition. What happened customarily was that the Princess's portrait would go simultaneously (allowing for the vagaries of horses and camels, galleons and mule trains) to many eligible princes. The princes, in turn, on receiving the portrait, would return gifts, sumptuous gifts, striking gifts, to the king, to be given to the Princess. And if she found them acceptable (or if her father did), then the princes would make the journey in person, and the Princess, in person, would make her choice. In this way, the King offended none of his proud neighbours, leaving the choice to the whim, or the aesthetic inclination, of the young woman herself. Of course, if there were any pressing reason why one alliance was more desirable than another, most fathers would enlighten their daughters, and some would exhort or threaten. In the case of Fiammarosa none of this applied. Her father wished her to marry for her own good, and he wished her to marry Prince Boris simply because

his kingdom was cold and full of icebergs and glaciers, where she would be at home. But he did not say this, for he knew that women are perverse.

The portraits, the letters, dispersed through the known world. After a time, the presents began to return. A small golden envoy from the East brought a silken robe, flame-coloured, embroidered with peacocks, light as air. A rope of pearls, black, rose, and luminous pale ones, the size of larks' eggs, came from an island kingdom, and a three-dimensional carved chess game, all in different jades, with little staircases and turrets edged with gold, came from a tiny country between two deserts. There were heaps of gold and silver plates, a leopard in a cage, which sickened and died, a harp, a miniature pony, and an illuminated treatise on necromancy. The King and Queen watched Fiammarosa as she gravely thanked the messengers. She appeared to be interested in the mechanism of an Orcalian musical box, but only *scientifically* interested, so to speak. Then Prince Boris's envoy arrived, a tall fair man with a gold beard and two gold plaits, riding a hairy, flea-bitten warhorse, and followed by packhorses with great

pine chests. He opened these with a flourish, and brought out a robe of silver fox-fur, an extraordinary bonnet, hung with the black-tipped tails of ermine stoats, and a whalebone box, polished like a new tooth, containing a necklace of bears' claws threaded on a silver chain. The Princess put her thin hands, involuntarily, to her slender throat. The envoy said that the necklace had been worn by Prince Boris's mother, and by her mother before her. He was clad in fleeces and wore a huge circular fur hat coming down over his ears. Fiammarosa said that the gifts were magnificent. She said this so gracefully that her mother looked to see if some ancestral inkling in her responded to bears' claws. There was no colour at all in her lips, or in her cheeks, but with her that could be a sign of pleasure — she whitened, where other women blushed. The King thought to himself that a man and his gifts were not the same thing. He thought that the narrow neck would have a barbaric beauty, circled by the polished sharp claws, but he did not wish to see it.

The last envoy declared that he was not the last envoy, having been parted from his fellows on

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their dangerous voyage. They had travelled separately, so that one at least of them might arrive with his gift. Prince Sasan, he said, had been much moved by the Princess's portrait. She was the woman he had seen in his dreams, said the envoy, lyrically. The Princess, whose dreams entertained no visitors, only white spaces, wheeling birds and snowflakes, smiled composedly, without warmth. The envoy's gift took a long time to unwrap. It was packed in straw, and fine leather, and silk. When it was revealed, it appeared at first sight to be a rough block of ice. Then, slowly, it was seen to be a glass palace, within the ice, so to speak, as hallucinatory turrets and chambers, fantastic carvings and pillars, reveal themselves in the ice and snow of mountain peaks. But once the eye had learned to read the irregularities of the surface, the magnifications and the tunnels within the block, it was seen to be a most cunningly wrought and regularly shaped transparent castle, within whose shining walls corridors ran into fretted chambers, staircases (with carved balustrades) mounted and descended in spirals and curves, in which thrones and pompous curtained beds stood in glistening

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cubicles, in which miraculous fine curtains of translucent glass floated between archways in still space. The glass castle was large enough for the centre to be hidden from the eye, though all the wide landings, the narrow passages, the doors and gangways, directed the eye to where the thickness of the transparent glass itself resisted penetration. Fiammarosa touched its cool surface with a cool finger. She was entranced by the skill of the layering. It was all done in a crystal-clear glass, with a green-blue tinge to it in places, and a different green-blue conferred simply by thickness itself. The eye looked through, and through, and in. Light went through, and through, and in. Solid walls of light glittered and, seen through their substance, trapped light hung in bright rooms like bubbles. There was one other colour, in all the perspectives of blue, green, and clear. From the dense, invisible centre little tongues of rosy flame (made of glass) ran along the corridors, mounted, gleaming, in the stairwells and hall-ways, threaded like ribbons round galleries, separated, and joined again as flames do, round pillars and gates. Behind a curtain of blue, a thread of rose and flame shone

and twisted. The Princess walked round, and back, looking in. 'It is an image of my master's heart,' said the lyrical envoy. 'It is a poetic image of his empty life, which awaits the delicate warmth of the Princess Fiammarosa in every chamber. He has been set on fire by his vision of the portrait of the Princess.'

The envoy was a sallow young man, with liquid brown eyes. The bluff King and the careful Queen were not impressed by his rhetoric. The Princess went on walking round the glass block, staring in. It was not clear that she had heard his latest remarks.

The second envoy from Prince Sasan arrived a few days later, dusty and travel-worn, another sallow man with brown eyes. His gift was dome-shaped. He too, as he unwrapped it, spoke lyrically of the contents. He did not appear to be speaking to a script; lyricism appeared to spring naturally to the lips of the Sasanians. His gift, he said, was an image, a metaphor, a symbol, for the sweetness and light, the summer world which the thought of the Princess had created in the mind of his master.

The second gift was also made of glass. It was a beehive, a transparent, shining form constructed of layers of hexagonal cells, full of white glass grubs, and amber-coloured glass honey. Over the surface of the cells crawled, and in the solid atmosphere hung and floated, wonderfully wrought insects, with furry bodies, veined wings, huge eyes and fine antennae. They even carried bags of golden pollen on their black, thread-glass legs. Around the hive were glass flowers with petals of crumpled and gleaming yellow glass, with crowns of fine stamens, with blue bells and fine-throated purple hoods. A fat bee was half-buried in the heart of a spotted snapdragon. Another uncoiled a proboscis and sipped the heart of a campanula. So, said the lyrical envoy, was the heart of his master touched by the warm thought of the Princess, so was love seeded, and sweetness garnered, in the garden of his heart. Hugh thought that this might be too much for his austere pupil, but she was not listening. She had laid her cool cheek against the cool glass dome, as if to catch the soundless hum of the immobile spun-glass wings.

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The third envoy arrived bloodied and incoherent. He had been set upon by bandits and had been forced to hide his package in a hollow tree, from which he had retrieved it, late at night. He unpacked it before the court, murmuring incoherently, 'So delicate, I shall be tortured, never forgiven, has harm come to it?' His package was in two parts, tall and cylindrical, fat and spherical. Out of the cylindrical part came a tall glass stem, and a series of fine, fine, glass rods, olive-green, amber, white, which he built, breathing heavily, into an extraordinarily complex web of branches and twigs. It was large – the height, maybe, of a two-year-old child. Folded into his inner garments he had a plan of the intervals of the sprouting of the branches. The assembly took a long time – the Queen suggested that they go and take refreshment and leave the poor, anxious man to complete his labour unobserved and in peace, but Fiammarosa was entranced. She watched each slender stem find its place, breathing quietly, staring intently. The spherical parcel proved to contain a pleroma of small spherical parcels, all nestling together, from which the envoy took a whole world of flowers,

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fruit, twining creepers, little birds, frost-forms and ice-forms. Part of the tree he hung with buds, tight and bursting, mossy and glistening, rosy and sooty-black. Then he hung blossoms of every kind, apple and cherry, magnolia and catkins, hypericum and chestnut candles. Then he added, radiating among all these, the fruits, oranges and lemons, silver pears and golden apples, rich plums and damsons, ruddy pomegranates and clustered translucent crimson berries and grapes with the bloom on them. Each tiny element was in itself an example of virtuoso glass-making. When he had hung the flowers and the fruit, he perched the birds, a red cardinal, a white dove, a black-capped rosy-breasted bullfinch, a blue Australian wren, an iridescent kingfisher, a blackbird with a gold beak, and in the centre, on the crest of the branches, a bird of paradise with golden eyes in its midnight tail, and a crest of flame. Then he hung winter on the remaining branches, decorating sharp black twigs with filigree leaf skeletons, flounces of snow, and sharp icicles, catching the light and making rainbows in the air. This, he said breathlessly, was his master's world as it would be if the Princess consented to be his wife, a paradise

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state with all seasons in one, and the tree of life flowering and fruiting perpetually. There is bleak winter, too, said the Princess, setting an icicle in motion. The envoy looked soulfully at her and said that the essential sap of trees lived through the frost, and so it was with the tree of life, of which this was only an image.

The Princess did not leave the tree for the rest of the day. Look, she said to Hugh, at the rich patterning of the colours, look at the way the light shines in the globes of the fruit, the seeds of the pomegranate, the petals of the flowers. Look at the beetles in the clefts of the trunk, like tiny jewels, look at the feathers in the spun-glass tail of the bird. What kind of a man would have made this?

'Not a prince, a craftsman,' said Hugh, a little jealous. 'A prince merely finds the best man, and pays him. A prince, at most, makes the metaphor, and the craftsman carries it out.'

'I make my own weaving,' said the Princess. 'I design and I weave my own work. It is possible that a prince made the castle, the hive and the tree.'

'It is possible,' said Hugh. 'A prince with a taste for extravagant metaphor.'

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'Would you prefer a necklace of bears' claws,' asked the icewoman, 'if you were a woman? Would you?'

'A man and his gifts are two things,' said Hugh. 'And glass is not ice.'

'What do you mean?' asked the Princess. But Hugh would say no more.

The princes arrived, after a month or two, in person. Five had made the journey, Prince Boris, the plump dusky prince who had sent the pearls, the precise, silk-robed prince who had sent the silk robe, the curly, booted and spurred prince who had sent the chess game, and Prince Sasan, who arrived last, having travelled furthest. Prince Boris, the King thought, was a fine figure of a man, strong like an oak-tree, with golden plaits and a golden beard. His pale-blue eyes were icy pools, but there were wrinkles of laughter in their corners. Prince Sasan rode up on a fine-boned, delicate horse, black as soot, and trembling with nerves. He insisted on seeing to its stabling himself, though he was accompanied by a meagre retinue of squires with the same sallow skins and huge brown eyes as

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the envoys. His own hair was black, like his horse, and hung, fine and dry and very straight, in a dark fringe, and a dark curtain, ending at his shoulders. He was a small man, a little shorter than Fiammarosa, but his shoulders were powerful. His face was narrow and his skin dark gold. His nose was sharp and arched, his brows black lines, his lashes long and dark over dark eyes, deeper-set than the envoys'. Prince Boris had a healthy laugh, but Prince Sasan was cat-like and silent. He made his bows, and spoke his greetings, and then appeared content to watch events as though he were the audience, not the actor. He took Fiammarosa's hand in his thin hand, when he met her, and lifted it to his lips, which were thin and dry. 'Enchanted,' said Prince Sasan. 'Delighted,' said the icewoman, coolly. That was all.

The visits were the occasion of much diplomacy and various energetic rides and hunting expeditions, on which, since it was high summer, the Princess did not join the company. In the evenings, there were feasts, and musical entertainments. The island prince had brought two porcelain-skinned ladies who played exquisite

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tinkling tunes on xylophones. The curly prince had a minstrel with a harp, and Prince Boris had two huntsmen who played a rousing, and blood-curdling, duet on hunting-horns. The Princess was sitting between Boris and the curly prince, and had been hearing tales of the long winters, the Northern Lights, the floating icebergs. Prince Sasan beckoned his squire, who unwrapped a long black pipe, with a reed mouthpiece, from a scarlet silk cloth. This he handed to the Prince, who set it to his own lips, and blew one or two tentative notes, reedy, plangent, to set the pitch. 'I based this music,' he said, looking down at the table, 'on the songs of the goat-herds.' He began to play. It was music unlike anything they had ever heard. Long, long, wavering breaths, with pure notes chasing each other through them; long calls which rose and rose, trembled and danced on the air, fell, whispered, and vanished. Circlings of answering phrases, flights, bird-cries, rest. The Princess's mind was full of water frozen in mid-fall, or finding a narrow channel between ribs and arches of ice. When the strange piping came to an end, everyone complimented the Prince on his playing.



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Hugh said, 'I have never heard such long phrases ride on one breath.'

'I have good lungs,' said Prince Sasan. 'Glass-blower's lungs.'

'The glass is your own work?' said the Princess.

'Of course it is,' said Prince Sasan.

The Princess said that it was very beautiful. Prince Sasan said:

'My country is not rich, though it is full of space, and I think it is beautiful. I cannot give you precious stones. My country is largely desert: we have an abundance only of sand, and glass-blowing is one of our ancient crafts. All Sasanian princes are glass-blowers. The secrets are handed on from generation to generation.'

'I did not know glass was made from sand,' said the Princess. 'It resembles frozen water.'

'It is sand, melted and fused,' said Prince Sasan. His eyes were cast down.

'In a furnace of flames,' said Hugh, impulsively. 'It is melted and fused in a furnace of flames.'

The Princess trembled slightly. Prince Sasan lifted his gaze, and his black look met her blue one. There were candles between them, and she saw

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golden flames reflected in his dark eyes, whilst he saw white flames in her clear ones. She knew she should look away, and did not. Prince Sasan said:

'I have come to ask you to be my wife, and to come with me to my land of sand-dunes and green sea-waves and shores. Now I have seen you, I —'

He did not finish the sentence.

Prince Boris said that deserts were monotonous and hot. He said he was sure the Princess would prefer mountains and forests and rushing cold winds.

The Princess trembled a little more. Prince Sasan made a deprecating gesture with his thin hand, and stared into his plate, which contained sliced peaches, in red wine, on a nest of crushed ice.

'I will come with you to the desert,' said the Princess. 'I will come with you to the desert, and learn about glass-blowing.'

'I am glad of that,' said Prince Sasan. 'For I do not know how I should have gone on, if you had not.'

And amidst the mild uproar caused by the departure from protocol, and the very real panic

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and fear of the King and Queen and Hugh, the two of them sat and looked steadily across the table at the reflected flames in each other's eyes.

Once it became clear that the Princess's mind was made up, those who loved her stopped arguing, and the wedding took place. Fiammarosa asked Hugh to come with her to her new home, and he answered that he could not. He could not live in a hot climate, he told her, with his very first note of sharpness. Fiammarosa was glittering, restless and brittle with love. Hugh saw that she could not see him, that she saw only the absent Sasan, that dark, secret face imposed on his own open one. And he did not know, he added, having set his course, how she herself would survive. Love changes people, Fiammarosa told him in a small voice. Human beings are adaptable, said the icewoman. If I use my intelligence, and my willpower, she said, I shall be able to live there; I shall certainly die if I cannot be with the man on whom my heart is set. He will melt you into a puddle, Hugh told her, but only silently, and in his mind. She had never been so beautiful as she was in her wedding gown, white as

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snow, with lace like frost-crystals, with a sash blue as thick ice, and her pale face sharp with happiness and desire in the folds of transparent veiling.

The young pair spent the first week of their marriage in her old home, before setting out on the long journey to her new one. All eyes were on them, each day, as they came down from their bed-chamber to join the company. The housemaids whispered of happily bloodstained sheets – much rumpled, they added, most vigorously disturbed. The Queen observed to the King that the lovers had eyes only for each other, and he observed, a little sorrowfully, that this was indeed so. His daughter's sharp face grew sharper, and her eyes grew bluer and clearer; she could be seen to sense the presence of the dark Sasan behind her head, across a room, through a door. He moved quietly, like a cat, the southern prince, speaking little, and touching no one, except his wife. He could hardly prevent himself from touching her body, all over, in front of everyone, Hugh commented to himself, watching the flicker of the fine fingers down her back as the Prince bent to bestow an unnecessary kiss of greeting after a half-hour absence. Hugh

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noticed also that there were faint rosy marks on the Princess's skin, as though it had been scored, or lashed. Flushed lines in the hollow of her neck, inside her forearm where the sleeve fell away. He wanted to ask if she was hurt, and once opened his mouth to do so, and closed it again when he saw that she was not listening to him, that she was staring over his shoulder at a door where a moment later Sasan himself was to appear. If she was hurt, Hugh knew, because he knew her, she was also happy.

Fiammarosa's honeymoon nights were indeed a fantastic mixture of pleasure and pain. She and her husband, in a social way, were intensely shy with each other. They said little, and what they said was of the most conventional kind: Fiammarosa at least heard her own clear voice, from miles away, like that of a polite stranger sharing the room in which their two silent selves simmered with passion. And Sasan, whose dark eyes never left hers when they were silent, looked down at the sheets or out of the window when he spoke, and she knew in her heart that his unfinished, whispered sentences sounded as odd to him as her silver

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platitudes did to her. But when he touched her, his warm, dry fingers spoke to her skin, and when she touched his nakedness she was laughing and crying at once with delight over his golden warmth, his secret softness, the hard, fine arch of his bones. An icewoman's sensations are different from those of other women, but Fiammarosa could not know how different, for she had no standards of comparison; she could not name the agonising bliss that took possession of her. Ice burns, and it is hard to the warm-skinned to distinguish one sensation, fire, from the other, frost. Touching Sasan's heat was like and unlike the thrill of ice. Ordinary women melt, or believe themselves to be melting, to be running away like avalanches or rivers at the height of passion, and this, too, Fiammarosa experienced with a difference, as though her whole being were becoming liquid except for some central icicle, which was running with waterdrops that threatened to melt that too, to nothing. And at the height of her bliss she desired to take the last step, to nothing, to nowhere, and the next moment cried out in fear of annihilation. The fine brown fingers prised open the pale-blue eyelids. 'Are you there?'

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asked the soft whisper. 'Where are you?' and she sighed, and returned.

When the morning light came into the room it found them curled together in a nest of red and white sheets. It revealed also marks, all over the pale cool skin: handprints round the narrow waist, sliding impressions from delicate strokes, like weals, raised rosy discs where his lips had rested lightly. He cried out, when he saw her, that he had hurt her. No, she said, she was part icewoman, it was her nature, she had an icewoman's skin that responded to every touch by blossoming red. Sasan still stared, and repeated, I have hurt you. No, no, said Fiammarosa, they are the marks of pleasure, pure pleasure. I shall cover them up, for only we ourselves should see our happiness.

But inside her a little melted pool of water slopped and swayed where she had been solid and shining.