

Finding a Heart of Snow




Ian Sentelik

To Ashley.

A class with her made me start this,
a fight with her made me finish it,
and a reconciliation with her made
it publishable.

Ashley, you are the best “big sis” a
guy could ever possibly have!!

 whorl of icicles swirled down through the air, obscured from the sight of passersby by the heavy black downpour of rain. The translucent ice crystals starred a path down the street, whirling briefly around a balding man with a black umbrella. Unaware that he had temporarily been the center of a cold, wild dance, the man hurried on, umbrella taking the weight of the darkness and rain sluicing from the sky.

The icicles trickled into an alleyway, spun around behind a Dumpster, and focused in on themselves. Rain-filled air crystallized, blossoming into a shape so white and bright it glowed even through the gloomy shroud of rain.

From behind the Dumpster a slender hand, whiter than the purest snow, reached up and touched the alley wall ever so lightly. Drawing herself up on the alabaster bridge of her pale arm was a woman, a woman so strange, so unnatural, that she could have stepped right out of a fairy tale.

She let out a long, sighing breath, so cold it melted into liquid in midair and joined the rain in falling. Teeth the same frosted translucence as ice cubes flashed through the shower.

“And so I have come.”

She reached one ivory hand out into the rain, disregarding the drops that ran into the sleeves of her trailing snowy robes. Eyes without color of their own stared up into the sky and reflected it, turning the color of slate.

“And so I must search.”

THE young woman with the emerald raincoat almost tripped over the white shape emerging from the alley. Although her first reflex was to kick out at it, the young woman was a cat-lover, and the small kitten with the bright pearl fur and curious sky-colored eyes was impossible to harm. Regretting once more that her apartment had a strict “No Pets” policy, the young woman bent down to get a closer look.

That was odd. The cat’s eyes had seemed dark just a moment ago. Now they looked green—as green as her raincoat, in fact.

Of course, her vision through the darkness of the storm was hardly very accurate. She reached out with both hands to pick up the cat, hoping to find a tag to give a hint of the owner, but the cat slid away out of her reach and into the downpour, the torch of bright fur quickly extinguished in sheets of liquid.

She was going to be late for work. She hurried on, hoping the cat wouldn’t stay out in the rain.

MAR fumbled for his keys, bracing his grocery bags against the peeling door, and received a mischievous tongue of water down the back of his neck from the dingy roof. He didn't even groan. It had been such a bad day that a little water almost seemed good.

He had woken up to find his Lilliputian apartment frigid and soaking, the window smashed in the night to allow direct access for both burglars and the rain-filled wind that had been squalling all day. His only things of value—his stereo and his college textbooks—had been stolen, and everything in the kitchen that wasn't nailed down had been embedded into either the wall, the floor, or—in the case of a nearly full jar of blackberry jelly—his backpack. Mar hadn't noticed the latter until he had realized in the middle of trying to clear the splattered eggs from the wall that he was going to be late for his first class, and had swung his backpack up onto his shoulder. Thereby irreversibly staining his only wool sweater.

A traffic jam thicker than the congealed blackberry jelly had kept him away from college until his second class was halfway over. He had finally arrived only to find he had missed half of the final notes for the test tomorrow—and of course, with no books, he had no other way to study for it. And directly afterward, Andrea had broken up with him.

Actually, that was probably the best of the bad things that had happened in this long, horrendous day. They had started going out a week ago through some accident of capricious thought, but soon realized that they were entirely

unsuited for any kind of relationship together. By the third date, most couples were post-coital. They were over. It was slightly disappointing, but also something of a relief.

Relief quickly squashed when he fell down a flight of stairs, walked into an opening door, and missed a test in his last class thanks to a dentist appointment he had been unable to reschedule, which ended up consisting of two hours in the waiting room and a thirty-second examination that had discovered the first cavity of his life.

Following that uplifting piece of news, he had gone to the grocery store to restock after the burglary, waited in line for half an hour, and found he didn't have enough money to pay for everything he had brought to the counter. So he'd taken back the milk, mixed vegetables, and jelly (he hadn't been entirely sure he wanted jelly anyway) and returned to the front to find his cashier gone. The other cashier, when presented with the situation, had popped her cinnamon gum and sent him to the back of her line. Forty minutes later, Mar had finally paid for his groceries and gone out to find his car window in pieces on the ground.

And all this time, it had been raining.

As he opened the door, one of the grocery bags squirted out from his hold and landed on the floor with the unmistakable crunch of something breaking.

"Damn it," Mar muttered, more out of habit than actual emotion. He was far too numb and cold and wet and tired to feel emotion.

He pushed the bag farther into his apartment with his foot, closed the door, and bent to pick up the bag.

A white shape blazed from around the edge of the bookshelf Mar had pushed against his broken window.

As the man slammed Mar up against the door by his throat, Mar realized that he wasn't quite numb and cold and wet and tired enough not to feel fear.

"You are one of his," the man said. "Where is he?"

Mar couldn't even breathe, let alone answer. The voice was as cold as the icy hand pressed like a tiger's paw against his throat.

"Speak!" The command was about as flexible as a glacier. "Tell me where he is hiding the Heart!"

The hand at Mar's throat felt like dry ice. Its cold was so intense it was burning away the little air he had left.

The man's eyes—gray, and as dark as the room around them—narrowed.

"Your oxygen is disappearing," he muttered. "Why is...oh. Oh. That's right. Mortals have to breathe..."

Mar felt his wrist lifted and slammed against the door—then the frozen pyre around his windpipe vanished. Cool, rain-filled air flooded down Mar's throat like the warmest, most refreshing wine—for a moment, all he could do was breathe, feeling ice crystals melt and run frigid fingers down

the collar of his shirt, although he had no idea where they had come from.

His neck felt bruised and burned with cold. He tried to bring his hands down to rub it and alleviate the cold at least, but his hands wouldn't move. He looked up and saw the man standing in front of him, arms folded. Not touching him.

Slowly Mar looked over at his left wrist. It was frozen to the door. He looked over at his right, and found it similarly shackled, pearled ice cementing it to the wood without difficulty.

Blood roaring suddenly in his ears, Mar's gaze snapped back to the man in front of him. Tall, solidly yet slimly built, hair and skin and clothes all nearly the same startling shade of pure crystalline white. Eyes, black-edged gray storms, slanted like tipped ice shards and somehow giving the impression of being too large for the face framed by a long, cascading mane of nearly translucent hair. Muscular arms folded across a chest sheathed in a flowing, sleeveless white robe, nails pearl-white without a trace of pink—and Mar was strangely certain that no nail polish was responsible. Bare feet, nails again a solid white, visible beneath the trailing folds of ivory robe cinched around a waist like an icicle with a crystal-fringed and -colored sash.

Those hands had been holding his arms to the door. But now ice did instead.

That was impossible.

“Now, listen to me and listen carefully,” the man said, voice soft and dangerous as a deep drift of snow. “I may not be a Spirit of Truth, but if you try to lie while held by *my* ice, I will know. Now tell me where he is.”

“*What?!*” Mar choked out. “I don’t even know what you’re *talking* about! Who...what ‘*he*’ are you *talking* about?!”

Stormy eyes narrowed further. “You do not know?” Then he blinked. “You do not know. You really do not know.”

“Why the hell *would* I know?! What are you talking about?! Who *are* you?!”

“Why do you radiate his power if you know nothing of him?” the man asked, although the question seemed directed more at himself than at Mar. “Unless...”

The diamond eyebrows snapped together. “How has your luck been lately?”

The question came from so far out of right field that Mar was thrown. “*What?*”

“Your luck.” His voice sharpened from snowdrift to silver sword. “How has it been lately?”

I’m being held captive in my own home by a crazy man with white nails. How do you think it’s been lately?! “The worst I’ve ever had in my life.”

The man stared at Mar for a long time, and then—just when Mar was about to demand a better explanation—he

leaned forward, seized Mar's face just below his chin, tilted his mouth up, and kissed him.

Something frozen, something so cold it burned, filled Mar's mouth like ice water. Without waiting for him to swallow, it forced itself down his throat, tracing a fiery pillar of cold down the center of his chest.

Mar didn't even register the fact that he was being kissed by a man. The cold *hurt*, cementing his insides together and hitting his stomach with the force of an avalanche. He couldn't breathe again; all he could see were the man's eyes, the same flecked hazel as his own (hazel? Hadn't they been gray? Had he been mistaken?) but completely calm—emotionless—cold—so cold—

Then the cold withdrew up his throat like a spider walking up a thread. It passed back between their mouths, and something knocked against Mar's teeth from behind as it did so—something hard, something that tasted metallic. Before Mar could recover from the cold, the man deftly reached past his teeth with his tongue and slipped the metallic thing out of his mouth.

The man touched both his hands to Mar's wrists again, and as suddenly as it had come, the ice was gone. Mar collapsed to the ground, aching all over from the cold, feeling for the first time in his life colder inside than out. The bruises he had garnered from his fall down the stairs were complaining fiercely all across his arms and legs, and it was becoming increasingly more difficult to breathe.

Ignoring whatever it was he had done to Mar, the man brought his hand to his mouth and spat out into it a tiny metal ball, about the size of a marble. He examined it dispassionately.

“This much already,” he murmured. “That many more have died in the journey...”

He stared broodingly at the metal marble—or whatever it was—for a moment longer, his eyes unmoving, unblinking. Then he slipped it down the front of his robe, and turned around in a swirl of white hair and fabric.

“*Wait!*”

The man in white stopped and turned, looking almost confused. Mar was still on the ground, but he had managed to get himself into a sitting position braced against the door, and cold though he was, his eyes were burning.

“Where are you going?”

The man tilted his head slightly, not seeming to notice his long hair as it fell into his eyes. “I am searching for something, and for the person who has stolen it.”

“So you’re leaving?” Anger gave Mar the semblance of warmth. “You break in here, assault me, try to interrogate me, do some *really* weird stuff to me, almost *freeze* me to death, and now you’re just *leaving*?!”

“I have no time to—” The man paused, considering. “But you were being used as a depository. Perhaps there is reason to stay with you...”

“I don’t want you staying! I want an explanation, and then I want you out of my house!”

“Perhaps the explanation will be long enough.” The man turned decisively back around, nodding. “You shall have it.”

THERE is something wrong with this picture, Mar thought suddenly.

He was sitting at his dwarf-sized coffee table, bathed in the faint glow of the ceiling light and wrapped in every length of un-blackberried cloth he owned, hands thawing gradually around a glass of steaming hot tea, looking across the little tabletop at a man who couldn’t possibly be human, who was sitting cross-legged in front of the broken window in a sleeveless robe, not even shivering as wisps of cold gusted in around the bookshelf still standing between the window and the rest of the apartment.

Who couldn’t possibly be human? What the hell else could he be? He had to be human. But Mar’s mind pulled up images of the ice that had miraculously appeared and locked him to the door, and of the kiss that had sent cold pouring into his body.

Mar flushed, embarrassment prickling him like needles, and gulped tea.

“So,” he said, once he had swallowed the blessedly warm liquid, “who are you?”

“My name, I suppose, as best you can consider things, is Shirai,” the white-skinned man said. “I am a snow spirit, and I and my clan make our home in the ice far to the north.”

Starting to take another gulp of tea, Mar stopped. “A *what* now?”

“A snow spirit.”

A...

Mar raised his glass to his lips again. This was the craziest load of bull’s feathers he had ever...

He paused, then lowered his glass very slowly. That actually sounded almost...

“That’s not possible,” he said slowly.

Shirai raised one colorless eyebrow. “Isn’t it?”

About to repeat himself, Mar found himself caught by Shirai’s eyes. They had seemed dark up until now. In fact, Mar suddenly recalled, when he’d been face-to-face with the...whatever he was, he could have sworn that Shirai’s eyes were the same color as his own—the same distinct hazel, like tree branches in summer. Yet now, they looked suspiciously clear.

Shirai tilted his head slightly, and suddenly Mar’s own face was reflected back at him from Shirai’s eyes as though from mirrors.

Mar’s fingers froze around his glass.

“What’s...your...eyes...?” Mar whispered.

“I am a snow spirit,” Shirai repeated patiently. “I have no natural corporeal form. I can only form one, out of snow. Ice. The body you are sitting across from is made out of ice, and only ice.”

“That’s not possible either.”

“Spirits do not lie.”

“If you’re not a spirit, that doesn’t have any bearing on this conversation.”

Shirai raised his other eyebrow. “If? Does that mean you’re considering that I may indeed be one?”

About to snap that of course he wasn’t, Mar realized it was a lie. There was no way to look Shirai in his reflective eyes and *not* believe that he was something outside the norm. Something like a snow spirit. He took refuge in his glass again.

“Okay,” Mar said finally, half the glass of tea now in his stomach. “Yeah, I’m starting to believe you. So you’re a snow spirit. So what are you doing here? In my house?”

Shirai inclined his head regally. “I apologize again for my misunderstanding. You were being used as a depository, and sensing the power in you I jumped to the conclusion you were involved with a certain thief.”

“What the hell is a depository?”

Shirai shifted slightly, his albino muscles—Were they really made out of ice? They *looked* real enough—rippling beneath the light fabric of his robe. “First, understand this. The thief I speak of is a spirit of luck, who has stolen from my clan in the north an artifact which we must have returned at all costs.”

“And this is...?”

“It is...” Shirai frowned. “To put it into your words is difficult. For a name...you may call it the Snowheart. It is a crystal, a construct which is the...the sum of all of our hearts.”

Mar almost groaned. “Okay. That just blew your story, buddy. Bad movie clichés are *not* something I—”

“I mean this literally,” Shirai interrupted. “It is made from the heart of every snow spirit of my clan. A very long time ago, our greatest queen fell in love with a human. She was strong, wise, kind, beautiful, the most powerful of us all...and the heat of her emotions killed her.”

“Killed...?”

“She died three days before the winter solstice,” Shirai said grimly. “Her heart burned so hot it melted her in...in the time it takes for a breath. Our hearts are our greatest enemies. So we separated our hearts from our bodies and froze them together into a communal crystal, which we kept hidden and protected in the ridge of a glacier.”

“Separated...? How could you do something like that?”

Shirai shrugged. “It was not difficult. As long as our hearts exist, we can easily separate ourselves from them. But in that solution laid a new problem. If our hearts were placed together such, they could be stolen.”

The pieces started to come together. “By this thief you’re looking for.”

“Yes. A spirit of luck.”

“Why would he *want* your hearts to begin with?”

Shirai sighed, and his frigid breath touched Mar’s cheek even from across the table. “Spirits of all kinds thrive on magic. Magic is many things; it is nature, it is light, it is life itself. But most accessibly, it is emotion. The heart is the wellspring of emotion, and from emotion comes magic. If one took the Snowheart and melted it down, releasing the emotion of all our hearts, one would release an immense quantity of magical energy.”

“And that’s what this guy is doing? Melting down all of your hearts?” Mar was feeling slightly dizzy from this influx of new information, but he was getting most of it. “What does that do to you?”

Shirai’s sigh was deeper this time. “It kills us. Those whose hearts he melts die immediately.”

The silence spiraled horribly, interrupted only by the wind wailing around the sides of the bookcase.

“Then...” Mar had already put two and two together, but he had to clarify this, “he’s killing you and all of your clan...just so he can get the magic out of your hearts?”

“Yes. Which is where *you* come in.” Shirai pointed across the table at Mar. “In raw form from emotion, magic cannot be taken by us. We—spirits—have to...to...” He hunted for words. “to *process* it, through our own magic, to change it into magic we can use ourselves. Snow-magic, luck-magic, wind-magic. To process it burns up your own magic, and leaves behind condensed power that is too pure to be used but too changed to be processed. Something has to be done with these deposits, or else they fall into the world themselves and cause unrestricted mayhem.”

“Deposits.” More pieces were falling into place. “You said I was a depository.”

“The easiest way to safely dispose of deposits is to force them into the body of a living creature. A depository. There it will have an effect, but small and usually localized around the depository. In this case, you have been made into a depository of luck magic. Therefore, once it became large enough to affect you, it changed your luck drastically. For the worse.”

Simmering anger was beginning to boil up through Mar’s veins. “You mean he’s killing you guys and taking the stuff left over from your deaths and shoving it into *me*?!”

“I am sure you are not the only depository,” Shirai said. “The amount of magic he must be processing would leave

behind far more deposits than what I found in your body. You are only one of many suffering from this situation.”

Mar slammed his glass down on the table. “God damn it! Then every single thing that’s happened today has been his fault!”

“Most likely.”

“And he’s killing other people to do it!”

“Other spirits, but yes.”

Mar no longer cared about the impossibility of the situation. He had something to blame for every single catastrophe and misfortune that had befallen him in the last twenty-four hours, and every grain of him was screaming for vengeance. “What can I do to help?”

Shirai blinked. “To...?”

“I will help you hunt him down. I will help you chase him down. I will help you beat him down, and when we’ve wiped the floor with him and you’ve got all your hearts back, I will make him *really* pay for everything he’s put me through for his stupid magic processing! How can I help?!”

Shirai opened his mouth as though to protest, then seemed to change his mind. “I...believe I could actually use your help. If you would like to aid me in recovering the Snowheart, I will accept.”

“I’m offering.”

“Then I thank you.” Shirai smiled slightly, a surprisingly warm smile for a man made out of ice. “What is your name?”

“Mar. Well, it’s not; it’s Marmion Roy, but nobody calls me that. Mar.”

“Mar.” Shirai stood up, his robe flowing with impossible smoothness. “I am honored to call you my ally.”

THEY had a plan.

It all depended on the deposit of luck magic.

Shirai explained that because making more depositories would increase the chances of another spirit being able to find him, the luck spirit had probably limited the number to less than five, one of whom was Mar. Meaning he would have to put more magic into Mar sooner or later; meaning that he would have to have physical contact with Mar; meaning that he would have to return to Mar’s house.

“But unfortunately, there’s only one way he’ll know you’re the depository again,” Shirai said. “Do not take offense, but you humans all look alike to us. It’s the magic he’ll look for.”

The snow spirit reached into his robes—literally reached *into*, his hand merging with and passing through the fabric like, well, magic—and pulled out the little ball of metal he had retrieved from Mar’s body. “So I have to put this back inside of you.”

Mar stared at the ball, which glimmered maliciously in the light from his ceiling lamp. “So...I have to be Mr. Unlucky again?”

“Yes. For a little while. Without this as a guide, he’ll never find you again.”

Mar sighed. “Okay. For a little while. What do I do, swallow it?”

“No.” Shirai extended his hand. “Come here.”

Mar stared at Shirai’s hand. His pearly nails gleamed on the bars of his long, slender fingers, almost luminescent, completely inhuman. The skin of his palm was snow-white, unmarked by scar or pock or wrinkle. Only one long line, from the cradle between his thumb and first finger to the slight hollow of his wrist, creased his hand.

“Are...” Mar swallowed. “Are you going to kiss me again?”

“Swallowing it would release the magic into your bloodstream, and probably kill you. I have to put it into you without it dissolving.”

“So...”

“So yes; I am.”

Mar hesitated for a long moment, then put his fingers on Shirai’s.

Shirai pulled Mar up to him, opened his mouth, and put the metal ball behind his own teeth. A moment before he tilted Mar’s face up and pressed them together, Mar realized

that his tongue—in fact, the entire inside of his mouth—was a delicate sky blue.

Then the cold reached down his throat, deep inside of him. But this time, it was much worse. It was so cold it burned, sticking to his insides with every centimeter it moved, desiccating the flesh as surely as an oven. It stung and burned and froze the blood in his veins—he didn't even feel Shirai push the metal ball into his mouth, or the cold pull it down into him. He couldn't move; he needed warmth, warmth, he was dying from lack of warmth...

The cold slowly began to retract back up his throat again, peeling itself from numb tissue with the feeling that it was taking layers of the stuff with it. Mar wanted to scream, but even without Shirai's mouth muting his own, he didn't think he could have. All of his work warming himself up had been undone in an instant; he felt made out of ice himself.

The cold vanished.

Mar stumbled to the sink, wrenched on the hot water, and stuck his face into the falling stream. Steam and liquid warmth poured over his face and into his mouth, down to his stomach, wonderful heat undoing the congealing his blood. With no regard for his clothing, he cupped his hands underneath the faucet and threw water into his face, splattering himself and his floor with it.

Bangs dripping, shirt dappled, he looked back at Shirai.

“That hurt,” he said softly.

Shirai's brow furrowed. "What is 'hurt'?"

Mar opened his mouth, then realized he had no words. Shirai had no concept of pain.

Somehow this made him seem less human than even his odd coloring or his mirror-like eyes or the stunning cold that filled Mar every time he kissed him. It was terrifying.

Yet also oddly fascinating.

Mar lowered his eyes to the sink, feeling suddenly like a wet black kitten trying to get involved in matters far outside its comprehension. "Never mind."

MAR lay in his bed, trying desperately to relax. It was futile. He was bait and his body wouldn't let him forget it.

Shirai had said the luck spirit would come—if he did at all—when Mar was asleep. Or at least, when he *thought* Mar was asleep. Depositories usually had magic dumped into them in their sleep, when they couldn't protest. Thus in sleep the spirit would come.

Mar forced his breathing to slow and tried to think about something else. It didn't quite work. All he could turn his mind to was Shirai, which didn't help matters at all. The man's pale exoticism was predatory. It gnawed on Mar's mind with a flash of milky skin, a curve of unrobed muscle, a lock of falling glassy hair.

Maybe this was why his relationship with Andrea had bombed.

Mar rolled over in his sheets, feeling his face growing hot. It wasn't the first time he'd wondered—sometimes he'd caught himself staring at other men—but he'd always managed to talk himself out of it up until now. Now...Shirai was so completely outside of anything Mar had ever seen or known that he had no excuses for him. He was spellbound.

Although he wouldn't have thought it possible, Mar's confusing thoughts passed lightly into dozing. A thousand bizarre, disconnected images flashed past his eyes on the screen of his lids: faces he knew, faces he didn't know, faces of animals, faces with animal features. When he felt the pressure on his chest and saw what was kneeling beside him, it was no wonder that at first he saw nothing out of the ordinary with it.

The hand touching his skin just where his collarbones ended and his nightshirt began was as slim as a blade of grass, and roughly the same color. Hair fell across the triangular green face like rainbow spray from the edge of a waterfall, and beneath it, eyes like golden coins glowed even in the shadows. His clothing seemed to be made from innumerable tiny gold bells, which rang softly against one another as he moved—a large shirt with a collar around his shoulders and hanging belled sleeves, and hanging golden trousers dragging against the floor.

Then a woman's voice bellowed "*NOW I HAVE YOU!*" and Mar snapped awake.

Something like a giant pearl crashed in through the window and resolved itself into the figure of a woman as white as Shirai, flowing tresses snapping like a banner, eyes flashing with venom. Mar stared at this startling woman for just a second too long; the green-skinned young man vaulted him and the bed in a single bound, his long hair slapping Mar across the face as he leapt.

Mar returned to himself and whirled on the spot, snatching at the slender figure—but the luck deposit was back in his body, and clearly doing its worst. Mar missed the young man completely, but slammed his hand into his bedside lamp, denting the lamp, the wall, and probably a few knuckles. Mar jerked back with a yelp and stuck his fingers in his mouth, only to realize too late that sometime in his sleep, his sheets had become wrapped around his waist too tightly to permit jerking back. He fell over off the side of his bed, cracking his head on the floor and replacing his vision with an explosion of stars.

The woman in white leapt across the room at the young green man, but her quarry was too quick for her. He was across the room faster than was humanly possible, his clothes ringing with a sound like mocking laughter. The woman ricocheted off the wall and came after him, her hand morphing into the head and mouth of a snow-white wolf; she snapped her new jaws closed in the space where the young man had been, but already he was gone. The ringing of his bells came from the ceiling, where he now crouched as though in defiance of gravity; from his new vantage point, he snapped his long green fingers.

Something moved in the air in such a bizarre way that shivers went down Mar's spine. The fabric of reality shifted slightly, and suddenly. For no conceivable reason and with no conceivable assistance, the floor beneath the left side of Mar's many-shelved bureau—an heirloom from his parents—shattered like glass. The bureau crashed partway into the hole, overbalanced, and slid grandly over to slam into the woman's side, pinning her against the wall.

The young green man blew the woman a kiss and darted across to the window, leaping through it and out of sight.

"Damn him!" the woman seethed, struggling uselessly. "Mar! Help me move this!"

Mar got up gingerly, one hand on his head. "How do you know me? Who are you?"

"I am Shirai!" the woman shouted. "Hurry! He's getting away!"

Mar's jaw dropped. "You're...what?"

"You know me! I am Shirai!"

"I...you..." Even after a day filled with impossibilities, this was simply impossible. "You *can't* be. Shirai is a *guy*."

"I am a *snow spirit*!" the woman countered. "This form is only ice, Mar! It is changeable! I *am* Shirai!"

Mar shook his head, hoping that when he stopped this psychotic hallucination would have stopped as well. He stopped. It didn't. "I don't under—"

The woman finally managed to get her hands around the bureau, and heaved. The bureau tilted upward just enough for her to squirm free, then dropped on its side to the ground where she had been with a crash that shook the room. Panting slightly, her breath emerging as fine crystal ice and melting in midair, the woman turned to Mar.

“The female form is lighter and more maneuverable,” the woman (Shirai?) snapped by way of an explanation. “I must catch him and extort the Snowheart before I dare to kill him. I cannot kill him while he has it, for fear that I will harm it myself. But he is escaping!”

Wasting no more time, the woman ran to Mar’s window, the wolf’s head on her arm melting and reshaping itself into a delicate frozen hand. Both her hands went, if possible, even whiter; she vaulted over and out the window frame, and where her hands touched, ice blossomed out of the air.

Mar ran to his window as well, just in time to see the woman climb up the side of the apartment building, her hands and feet freezing to the walls where they touched, streaking up around windows and balconies in pursuit of the green figure of the luck spirit.

The door creaked in protest as Mar slammed it open and ran outside. Unless the two spirits could fly—which he wouldn’t discount but didn’t really want to think about dealing with—there was only one place they could end up.

SHIRAI—for it was of course Shirai, regardless of how much his form had changed—moved faster than she had ever moved in her life. The life of every spirit in her clan—hers included—depended upon her catching and stopping this luck spirit. If he continued to melt the Snowheart, they would die. All of them.

She pushed herself to move faster still, slamming her hands and feet against and off the wall of the huge building Mar lived in almost faster than the eye could follow. Her eyes were locked on the luck spirit above her, and as she dodged the obstacles of balconies and the dangers of windows she saw she was catching up.

The realization drove her to new heights of speed. By the time the building ended and the luck spirit flipped over and across onto the roof, Shirai was right behind him.

Cornered on the roof, with nowhere left to go except down, the luck spirit turned and gave Shirai a dazzling smile. “I thought one of you would be coming after me.”

“Good. Then you’re not quite the mental deficient I thought you were.”

“Now that’s harsh.” His voice sounded oddly like the ringing of the bells that made up his clothing. “Could a mental deficient have stolen your Heart?”

“Nobody but a mental deficient would ever have *tried* to steal our Heart.”

The luck spirit opened his (he was no more a man than Shirai was a woman; however, his form was currently masculine) mouth again, but Shirai was done with talking. She seized two handfuls of air and froze them solid.

Spikes of ice streaked toward the luck spirit like javelins. The spirit slid around them like a summer breeze, avoiding each with the careful precision of a dancer, but the projectiles were only meant as a diversion. While the luck spirit dodged, Shirai closed her eyes and forced herself through a transformation.

It was male Shirai that lunged at the luck spirit and almost got him by the throat. It was only through the sheerest luck (of course) that the green-skinned spirit managed to avoid the white grasp, ducking underneath Shirai's arm and tangling a gold-clad leg around Shirai's ankles. Shirai fell heavily.

"Clumsy, aren't we?" the luck spirit asked, his bells laughing, although his voice was not.

"Stupid, aren't we?" Shirai retorted.

And with a great blast of cold that sent icicles dripping over the side of the building, *the entire roof of the apartment building froze.*

The luck spirit realized what Shirai was doing only a millisecond after he started to do it, and jumped, just barely avoiding the wave of freezing power that would have cemented him to the roof. As it was, he landed back on pure,

thick, slick ice, and his feet flew out from under him at once. It was his turn to land heavily.

“Stupid *and* clumsy,” Shirai amended, standing on the ice with perfect ease. “What’s the matter? You stole our Heart, didn’t you? Can’t you handle a little ice?”

The luck spirit attempted to flip to his feet again, but failed miserably.

Shirai had no more time to waste on taunts. He grabbed fresh handfuls of air, froze them into javelins, and threw them with all his strength. Perhaps pinned like a caribou, the luck spirit would be more *helpful*.

The luck spirit saw the javelins flying toward him, saw capture riding on their shining backs, and snapped his fingers again.

A heavy gust of wind suddenly blew over the side of the building, catching the javelins—which were, after all, only ice, if sharply pointed ice—and throwing them wild like sloppily tossed darts. The wind spun them up off to the side, on a direct course toward the door leading down into the apartment building.

The door opened, revealing behind it Mar, who had run up six stories to reach it only to be betrayed once again by the luck deposit.

“*Mar!*” Shirai yelled.

Mar saw the ice arrows speeding toward his head and did the only logical thing he could: he fell flat on his face.

The ice shattered on the doorway, exploding into thousands of falling blue shards that whizzed around Mar like angry wasps, stinging his hands and face with razor-cold edges. Of course, that was infinitely preferable to being hit by the javelins whole.

And then, standing up, Mar accidentally set his foot on the frozen edge of the doorway. His foot flew. The rest of him followed. And it was Mar's turn to land heavily on his back on the ice that now coated the roof, with just enough momentum that he *slid*.

Slid just a *little* too close to the luck spirit, who landed a powerful kick to his stomach. Mar spun across the ice like a hockey puck, completely winded, and slammed up against the railing that fenced in the roof from the sky, coughing.

The luck spirit laughed once, a shining, simple sound like the popping of a soap bubble, and snapped his fingers.

Shirai's eyes widened, and he lunged forward even faster than he had climbed the side of the building. Even faster—but still too slow. The railing cracked and warped and came completely free of the building, the entire long black-iron length pulling free like errant stitching from an unraveling quilt, falling away into space.

And Mar fell with it. Until Shirai dropped at the edge of the building and flung himself forward, seizing Mar's hand, freezing their fingers together. Before Shirai could pull Mar back up—before Mar could even fully realize that Shirai had him—the luck spirit was behind him, having slid on his

stomach like a seal. There was something in his hand, something that glittered in the moonlight like silver.

Mar just had time to think it might be a knife before the luck spirit slammed it hard into Shirai's back.

Shirai's face contorted.

And then they were both falling.

Air slashed past them like knives, whipping Shirai's long hair around both of them in stinging, snapping knots.

Twelve stories is a long way to fall when you're looking at it from the top of the building. Once you've fallen from that building, however, twelve stories starts to look amazingly short.

Without conscious thought, Mar hauled on Shirai's hand, pulling the two of them closer together, and wrapped his arms around the snow spirit's frigid chest. Shirai was still breathing; whatever the luck spirit had plunged into his back, it hadn't killed him. Yet. But the fall.... Mar had no idea if spirits could be dropped from such heights without injury, and on Shirai rode the lives of God only knew how many other spirits.

Struggling, Mar wriggled both of them around in midair, trying to get himself on the bottom. Regardless of how they landed, he was probably a goner. But Shirai was tougher. Shirai might survive if his fall was broken.

It gave Mar a perverse kind of pleasure, even now staring death in the face, to think that despite everything—especially

the luck deposit—he was managing to be of use. To be of real use, for possibly the first time in his life. To be of use protecting someone most people would never even be able to imagine.

Colorless eyes snapped open.

Shirai tightened his grip around Mar's back, threw his hand out above their heads toward the ground, and released a great blast of power.

Ice sprayed from Shirai's hand and hit the ground, reflecting and shattering up and away in all directions, extending forth from Shirai's hand to the ground a huge spire of ice.

Their fall was jerked up short with neck-snapping speed. Shirai's hand, encased in the ice he had just created, snapped inhumanly far backward, and Shirai and Mar both were slammed up around and back as though by a baseball bat. The icy peak of the construction exploded, shattering into the traditional thousand pieces, and their fall, so briefly halted, returned with a vengeance.

Shirai reached out blindly with his free hand and plunged it deep into the ice, solidifying the frost to his skin. Again they were snapped up and back with painful suddenness, but it wasn't as bad this time. They slammed together into the side of the ice and hung there from Shirai's wrist for one breathless second, locked together, neither able to feel the cold that breathed off the magical ice like exhaust.

Then lights flickered on in the apartments all around them. It took Mar a moment to realize why; then he remembered the railing the luck spirit had cursed off the roof, and connected it to a raucous crashing noise he had heard but not registered during his fall. Its landing must have woken every person in the apartment complex.

Before Mar could even begin to think about how you explained the sudden appearance of a tower of ice in the middle of a modern-day apartment complex, Shirai dragged his wrist out of the ice and pushed off against it, throwing both himself and Mar out into the air again. As they fell, the ice vanished. Disappeared completely.

Then Mar and Shirai hit a line of hedges along the edge of the apartments, and disappeared into them.

ENVELOPED by the shadows of leaves, poked and hooked by a thousand twigs and thorns, Mar lay silent against Shirai, the two of them surrounded by and hidden in the accommodating hedges. For more than a minute, all Mar could do was cling to Shirai, heedless of the cold of his body, shaking from pure undiluted fear. He could have died. God, he could have *died*. They *both* could have died. Shirai seemed just as aware of it as Mar was; his arms were crushing Mar almost painfully hard, and his breath was fast and ragged, brushing ice crystals across Mar's hair. His heart was slamming against his ribs, so hard that Mar could feel it.

Wait. Shirai's *heart*?

"Shirai!" Mar said as loudly as he dared. "Your heart—"

"I know," Shirai gritted back between his teeth.

The image of the luck spirit plunging something into his enemy's back sprang to Mar's mind anew.

"The luck spirit stabbed you with your *heart*!"

"I know," Shirai groaned.

"But—you said that for snow spirits, a heart is—"

"Mar," and in the short time Mar had known him, he had already been certain he would never again hear the pleading note he heard from Shirai now. "I need help—I'm burning—"

Mar cursed himself. His body temperature was surely not doing the snow spirit any good.

"C'mon. Let's get out of here, get back to my apartment. It'll be okay, I promise. Just..."

Getting out of the bushes was easier said than done. Mar only managed it through a combination of desperation and, oddly enough, his bad luck, which caused three different branches to break underneath him and ended up dumping him hard on the concrete. It hurt quite a lot but got him out of the bushes alive. Taking Shirai's hands to help pry him out, Mar realized that his right wrist was dangling limply.

"Shirai, your wrist—"

“It broke our fall,” Shirai muttered, tiny luminescent orbs of sweat beading on his pale forehead and eyebrows. “It needs freezing...”

Mar touched Shirai’s wrist gently, and winced. It felt like a square of silk wrapped around crushed and sliding ice cubes.

“Freezing,” Mar repeated, extracting a fold of Shirai’s robes from one of the bushes. “Don’t worry. We’ll do that, as soon as we get back.”

THE walk up to Mar’s apartment was just long enough for Mar to get very, very worried about Shirai. The snow spirit was unable to walk on his own, although he tried. His breath was coming faster and harsher than a winter gale, and icy water was rolling off his entire body in rivulets. It was almost like Shirai’s skin was melting.

Mar shuddered in a way that had nothing to do with the nearness of Shirai’s cold, and unconsciously picked up his pace.

They reached Mar’s apartment after the longest few minutes Mar thought he would ever live through. Fumbling for his keys, Mar’s fingers—slick with water and slicker with bad luck—dropped them to the doormat. Not even wasting time to curse, Mar leaned Shirai against the door and leaned down.

A squirrel—a *squirrel!!*—darted out of nowhere and ran at the key.

There was no doubt whatsoever where the furry animal had come from. Mar's bad luck was in full stride. The squirrel got to the key before Mar did, seized the shiny silver in its sharp little teeth.

Shirai's foot swung out of nowhere and slammed the squirrel against the door. The squirrel yelped and dropped the key, and Mar snatched it. His bad luck let out a nearly audible groan.

The squirrel shook itself once, then seemed to come back to itself. For a moment it stared at Shirai, mesmerized as though by a cobra. Then it turned tail and ran.

Mar wanted to throw something at it, but had neither the time nor the ammunition. He slammed the door open, got Shirai inside and down on the couch, and kicked the door shut while en route to the freezer.

"Shirai," Mar said urgently, dragging a handful of ice cubes out of the freezer, "tell me, what do I need to—?"

The ice cubes slipped from his fingers and crashed across the floor.

Mar had maneuvered Shirai into a sitting position on his couch. In the space of time between when Mar had put Shirai down and gotten out the ice cubes, Shirai had slid down onto his side, unable to keep himself upright. Behind him, a massive smear of wetness was soaking into the

couch. His white robe was dripping like an overfilled sponge. His chest fluttered like a bird's and his entire face was screwed up in pain.

Snow spirits didn't know pain.

Mar ran for Shirai, slipping so many times on the scattered pieces of ice that he ended up scrabbling to the couch on his hands and knees.

"Shirai?!" Mar asked desperately. "Shirai, talk to me! How can I help?! After that luck spirit—"

Shirai's eyes snapped open.

Mar froze. In every movie he had ever seen, sudden opening of eyes heralded disaster and/or murder. But Shirai didn't turn homicidal, or start gibbering nonsense. He stared up at the ceiling, his eyes reflecting its whiteness most eerily, so that he looked blind.

"Shirai?" Mar asked again, uncertainly.

"He defeated me," Shirai whispered. "He defeated me...and he got away...."

Mar lost his train of thought. In those now-blind eyes, Mar saw...sadness. No, more than sadness. Despair. Desolation. Complete and total devastation.

More emotion than Mar had yet seen from him.

"I...you...what?" Mar said incoherently.

“He got away,” Shirai repeated. “He got away.... He’s melting away our hearts at this minute, killing us now...more of us dying by the second, because of him...because he got away!”

And Shirai’s eyes shone with a sheen of liquid that overflowed and spilled over onto his already drenched face.

He was *crying*.

“And it’s all my fault that he did!” Shirai continued, his voice rising. “My fault.... I was the hope of our clan, and I let him slip away...immobilize me, almost kill you, and slip away to kill the rest of us.... I failed.... I *am* failed...a failure....”

And Shirai lunged to his feet, spraying water droplets everywhere, his broken wrist hanging like a limp banner at his side.

“Shirai!” Mar yelped, jumping up, stepping on another convenient ice cube, and slamming back to the ground. “Shirai, it’s not your fault. He outmaneuvered you because I got in the way—”

Shirai’s eyes were no longer reflecting the white of the plaster above him, but the shadows of the room around him, and instead of grief, they were now rife with self-loathing. Hatred was circling endlessly in the shadows of his eyes.

“It *is* my fault!” Shirai shouted at Mar, his voice becoming—there was no other word for it—hysterical. “I am one of the oldest of the snow spirits! I am supposed to

protect my clan! And look at me—relying on you for help, putting you in danger to catch him, failing even with all your help, let him drop you off this building. I can't even protect my allies!”

Mar wanted to grab Shirai by the shoulders, but wasn't quite sure he dared. “Shirai, look at me! I'm still here! I'm fine! I can still help you, and I'm going to help you! Remember, you said you'd let me get my crack at that guy once we catch him?! We are going to catch him! You're still not too late! Now get a hold of yourself and *realize* that!”

Shirai stared at Mar, tears mingling with ice water to flow freely down his face. With a start, Mar realized that Shirai was once again at such an angle that Mar's own face was reflected in his eyes. And then, with another start, Mar realized what was going on. Shirai's heart was doing this.

Like the key to some emotional chest, with his heart back in his body, Shirai was feeling all of the emotions he had not shown before all at the same time. Not just emotions but feelings, too—pain and sadness and anger and loathing and guilt, all whirling past in a kaleidoscope that stopped just long enough for Shirai to be struck by another one before it spiraled off again. It was too much; it was straining his entire body. He really was melting. His emotions were killing him.

“I'm having to rely on you for this,” Shirai said. “I'm putting so much on you—so much you don't need to deal with, so much beyond what you can safely handle—”

“I think I’ve handled this just fine up until now!” Mar said heatedly.

“*You almost died!*” Shirai’s voice was definitely hysterical now. “You almost died, right in front of me! You’ve been dragged into this so deep. Now that luck spirit won’t rest until the both of us are dead, because you’re a danger to him as well just for knowing what I’ve told you—what *I’ve* told you! I’ve as good as killed you myself—”

Mar couldn’t take it. He grabbed Shirai by his shoulders at last, staring into his guilt-ridden eyes.

“Shirai, I’m not going to die. You’re not going to die. None of your clan are going to die—*if we move right now*. We don’t have time for you to beat yourself up over this! Look, you did nothing wrong, okay? The *luck spirit* involved me in this by making me a depository. You didn’t do it. Hell, you *saved* me from it.”

“And then put it back into you. And hurt you—” Shirai stopped, face twisting with horror. “Mar, I hurt you. This is hurt? This is what I—?”

Oh, crap! “Shirai, forget about it! I—okay, yes, it hurt when you put that deposit thing back in. But it didn’t matter! Because I—” the words came out of him without conscious permission “liked it!”

Shirai stared at Mar.

“I—liked it,” Mar repeated, feeling his face catch on fire with crimson flush. “When you kissed me. I liked it. Don’t

beat yourself up over that, please. It hurt, but it was to help me, and it didn't matter that it hurt...because I—”

Shirai's mouth seized his with the hunger of a ravenous wolf. Mar yelped against his mouth in surprise, and Shirai used the opportunity to deepen the kiss, his tongue so cold on Mar's lips, his teeth.

Mar braced himself for the cold—the horrible, chilling, soul-biting cold that had accompanied Shirai's other kisses. But it didn't come. Shirai only pressed up closer against him, ice water running across both of their mouths, from Shirai's skin to Mar's. The snow spirit's undamaged hand pressed as a cold weight against Mar's back, crushing them together as they had been in the bushes.

Mar could not not respond. He wrapped his own hands across Shirai's back, dragging himself closer until the water from Shirai's body was soaking his clothes clean through, and let the last of his mental barriers go. The kiss deepened and hastened, turning into another, and another, each budding off the last like roses on a trellis.

Then Shirai paused, his white lips a hairbreadth from Mar's.

“I'm sorry,” Shirai whispered.

“What?!” Mar was feeling blood pounding in his ears—as well as somewhat lower down—and was almost certain he had misheard.

“My body.” Shirai began to pull himself back. “Males prefer females—”

“No I don’t,” Mar interrupted, grabbing desperately at Shirai’s robe. “I don’t, damn it. I don’t want a girl, or a woman, or any kind of female. I want you, just like this.”

Mar fell against Shirai, fisting his hands in the back of his robe, struggling not to lose himself completely and cry when it was Shirai who was in the middle of an emotional catastrophe. Around him, Shirai’s arms were loose. Then they tightened. And something freezing cold and far too solid to be ice or water slid down the back of Mar’s jeans.

Mar lost all his breath in a rush.

“I think I want you too, Mar,” Shirai said, his voice fogged with lust.

Lust was an emotion.

“Oh God,” Mar gasped, yanking his head down so that Shirai’s lips hit his forehead instead of his mouth. “No, no, wait. I can’t—I mean, you can’t—”

“Why?” Shirai asked softly, his voice confused and oddly childish-sounding.

“Shirai—your emotions being stirred up—they’re, like, melting you or something. I’m not sure, but doing this—Shirai, I’m afraid that *I’ll* kill you—”

“Mar,” Shirai said quietly, “I’m feeling more heat in my body than I ever have before, for anything. And I think you

can...take the heat away. And I'm afraid...I'm afraid that I *will* melt, if you don't."

"I want to, Shirai. I want to, really—but"

Shirai's hand did something that made the rest of the sentence freeze solid in Mar's throat.

"I want to, too, Mar," Shirai breathed.

And then neither of them had breath to say anything at all.

MAR woke up on his floor, cold down to his marrow. The light of a failing sunset was spilling through the window he did not have a bookshelf pushed in front of. He had slept through almost the entire day. Here on the floor? He was freezing cold, but oddly enough, felt none of the aversion to the temperature that he usually did. Why not? What had—

Oh.

Mar felt himself blush, and was very grateful to feel the heat warm his face.

His clothes were...absent. He sat up to look for them and saw next to him, luminescent in the darkness of his little apartment, a lithe, pale, snowy body sprawled in the shadows like a cat in the sun.

Mar gazed at Shirai, losing himself in the form of the man he now knew so well and wanted so badly to know better still. Shirai's long hair spilled like mist across the

frozen whiteness of his skin, smooth as silk and cool as water—Mar could now personally attest to that. His eyes were closed, his head pillowed on one muscular arm, the lines of his shoulder leading down to gorgeously sculpted pectorals tipped with alabaster nipples. Mar remembered with wonderful clarity the shock he had felt when he had pulled Shirai’s robe off his shoulders, and seen the impossible whiteness of his nipples.

Utter shame had crossed Shirai’s face. “I...my body is not...it repulses you...?”

Mar had had to laugh. “Oh my God, no. Never. No. Shirai, you are the most exotically sexy guy I could possibly dream of. You are...”

Words had failed Mar at that point. But actions hadn’t.

As though sensing Mar’s eyes on him, Shirai moved, an odd, squirming kind of motion. He moved first one way—then another—and then with startling suddenness, he jerked awake.

“Whe—I—wha—?!”

Mar blinked. Shirai was staring at him like he had never seen him or anything like him before. Before Mar had time to get worried, however, recognition dawned in Shirai’s eyes.

“Mar...?”

“Yes,” Mar ventured.

“I...” Shirai shook his head, pushing himself up to sit on his feet. “What’s going on?”

“I...we...” Mar felt his blush rising, but also his worry. “Last night, we...”

“But after that, we—that is, I—” Shirai shook his head again, hair swinging across his chest. “I was in a strange place, with many strange buildings and people...”

“Strange? You mean, a dream?” Mar hazarded.

“A dream?” Shirai repeated.

“Yes, a—” Mar stopped. “Do you know what a dream is?”

“Yes, I know the meaning, but...” Shirai blinked. “Snow spirits do not—”

He stopped abruptly, his face falling deathly still. Mar wanted to finish the sentence, but had a feeling he shouldn’t. An intense battle was raging in Shirai’s frozen expression.

“Snow spirits do not dream,” Shirai continued, his voice quiet, wondering. “Snow spirits do not feel pain. Snow spirits do not lie with humans.” He shook his head a third time. “Snow spirits do not want humans.” He looked up at Mar, his eyes a blizzard of conflicting thoughts and feelings. “Snow spirits do not *want*.”

“Not even each other?” Mar asked.

Shirai shook his head yet again, but this time slowly. “No. I have not ever...not once...what we did last night...”

As though Mar hadn't already seen enough things to blow his mind, he now saw perhaps the most unbelievable of all: Shirai *blushed*. A deep sky-blue tint tinged his skin from his collarbones up, cooling the air so much that even Mar could feel it. Shirai raised his hand to touch his cheek, looking as astounded as Mar felt—and Mar noticed something else.

“Your wrist—”

Shirai looked at it, and rotated it. Then he raised his other wrist, and did the same. Then he stared at both of them.

“I broke it, did I not?” Shirai asked, his voice filled with wonder. “Last night. Catching us from the fall.”

“Yes,” Mar said, feeling very much out of his league. “I thought you needed to freeze it?”

“I should have needed to,” Shirai said, sounding just as mystified as Mar. “I was so hot last night—hotter than I have ever been. My heart hurt, pulsing through my body, making me so hot; I should have melted. Certainly my wrist should not have set so fast. Not even in our lands of the north should my wrist have set this fast...”

Shirai suddenly seemed to realize what he had said. He grabbed at his bare chest with both hands.

“Shirai?!” Mar asked, alarmed.

“It doesn't hurt!” Shirai exclaimed, shocked. “I'm not melting. I'm not even warm! *It does not hurt!*”

Mar blinked. “Really?”

“I don’t understand!” Shirai ran his hands over his body, as though assuring himself that he wasn’t evaporating away as he spoke. “Our hearts—our emotions—are supposed to melt us! But now—I’m feeling more emotion than ever I have—and I’m—”

Mar was thinking hard, putting two and two together and trying with all his might to get four. Finally, it seemed to click. The germ of an idea blossomed in his mind.

“Shirai,” Mar said, getting Shirai’s attention. Then he darted forward and pressed his mouth against the cool, pearly skin of the torso he had been admiring just a minute ago.

Shirai yelped and jumped, his face once again turning sky-blue. “Mar!”

Mar pushed himself up directly in front of Shirai, and touched his fingers to Shirai’s cheek. The cold radiating from the sky-blue blush was cold enough to burn.

“Shirai,” Mar said, “I think I know why your wrist set so fast.”

DÉJÀ VU, Mar thought suddenly.

Once again he was sitting at his dwarf-sized coffee table, bathed in the faint glow of the ceiling light and wrapped in every length of un-blackberried cloth he owned, hands

thawing gradually around a glass of steaming hot tea, looking across the little tabletop at a man who he now knew *wasn't* human, who was sitting cross-legged in front of the broken window in a sleeveless robe, not even shivering as wisps of cold gusted in around the bookshelf still standing between the window and the rest of the apartment.

Except this time, he knew the man—knew the man very intimately. And the idea that he was not human was no longer a barrier, or even a consideration. He was Mar's very first lover. That was all that mattered.

Lover.

Mar turned the word over in his mind, savoring it like the tea steaming in his glass. Savoring it...but at the same time thinking about it.

Was "lover" all he wanted Shirai to be?

Shirai waited until Mar had swallowed the tea in his mouth. Then he leaned across the coffee table, his eyes reflecting blurs of color with intense focus. "You said you had an idea of why my wrist set."

"Yes," Mar acquiesced, dragging his mind back to the more urgent problems at hand. His personal life could wait. "Your face was even colder than usual when you blushed."

"Yes," Shirai agreed.

"Well, here's my thought—and I don't understand snow spirit-body chemistry or anything, so correct me if I'm wrong

anywhere. It seems like your blood is some kind of supercooled liquid.”

“Some kind of what?”

Mar silently thanked God that he was majoring in chemistry. “Supercooled liquid. It’s a liquid that’s been brought down below its freezing temperature, but hasn’t been allowed to freeze. So your blood should be frozen, but isn’t—maybe because it’s moving, or maybe just because you’re a snow spirit or something. So it’s *really* cold.”

“All right,” Shirai said, frowning slightly.

“All right. Supercooled blood. Now, for humans, when we blush, blood gets concentrated in our face. Our blood is hot. It warms us up. For you, your blood is cold. It cools you down. Essentially, things that would make me hot make you cold, because of your blood.”

“All right,” Shirai said again.

“So, when I blush, it’s hot. When you blush, it’s cold. When I...um...” Mar fit his description, and blushed. “Last night made me hot, all over. My circulation sped up and my blood pumped faster, making me hot. Now, if it did the same thing to you, and your blood pumped faster—”

“I would become cold,” Shirai finished, his eyes lighting with comprehension. “And I was. Last night made me so cold.” Shirai snapped his fingers. “That’s it, isn’t it?! You made me so cold that I froze all over again!”

“Good,” Mar said, relieved. “That was what I was thinking, so if you got that same conclusion too, maybe it’s not as weird as it sounds.”

“There’s one problem, though, Mar,” Shirai said.

“What?”

“Our queen.” Shirai spread his hands. “I swear to you, I was there, Mar. Her emotions melted her in a heartbeat when her human love rejected her—”

Oh, crap. That’s right. That doesn’t make sense. If she melted, why did Shirai—

Melted. Rejected. Depression. Shirai, last night. If they get cold when we get hot—

That’s it!

“Shirai!” Mar expostulated. “I’ve got it!”

Shirai stopped midsentence. “You do?”

“It’s so simple!” Mar jumped to his knees, slamming his palms down on the table. “When we get excited or happy, we feel warm. If you get excited or happy, you feel cold. But if we get depressed, or sad, then *we* feel cold. So if *you* feel depressed or sad—”

“We feel hot?” Shirai hazarded.

“Exactly! It makes perfect sense! Depression makes our blood slow down, and we start cooling down. Depression

would make *your* blood slow down, so the heat from the outside would start melting you! Just like last night!”

“Last night?” Shirai nodded, half-convinced. “That’s true. I was feeling...the words are...grieved? Depressed? And I *was* melting. But our queen—in the north, where it’s so much cooler, could she really have melted so—?”

“If her love rejected her, and she really, really loved him, then she might have become so depressed that her blood just slowed to a snail’s pace. If you need to be supercooled, I think almost any air here on Earth would be too hot for you if you weren’t. You weren’t as depressed as she was, so even though it’s warmer here, you didn’t melt as fast. That’s it! I’m certain of it!”

Now Shirai looked convinced. More than convinced. Jubilant. “That *is* it! I think you’re right. I really think you’re right!”

“Then it’s not really your hearts that are your greatest enemies,” Mar said. “It’s depression. Inaction. Sadness and grief. And that’s the same for us, too. A lot of times, if two people really love each other and one of them dies, the other one will die of heartbreak. That’s the problem. That’s what it is!” Mar paused, the enormity of the revelation breaking over him. “Shirai, you know what that means?”

“What?”

“*You don’t need the Snowheart anymore.* You don’t have to keep your hearts vulnerable; you just have to help one another through your sadness. Not only can you save your

hearts from the luck spirit this time, you can save them from anybody who would ever attack them ever again—and stop the tragedy that killed your queen from ever happening again!”

If somebody had told Mar twenty-four hours ago that he would say something that would make Shirai’s jaw hit the floor, he would have laughed in their face.

“You’re right!” Shirai exclaimed. “By the God and the Goddess as one...you’re right! Mar, you are *brilliant!*”

Mar blushed. “Well, I mean, don’t thank me yet. We still have to get that luck spirit, or we won’t have any hearts to do this with.”

The atmosphere in the room changed to deadly seriousness. Shirai’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, don’t worry. We will. I am not letting him get away with what he’s done to us—and you.”

For some reason, that made Mar feel very warm inside. But he did his best to ignore that. “Okay. So, do I act as decoy again, or...?”

“No,” Shirai said, becoming more like the Shirai Mar had known before the luck spirit had stabbed him with his heart. “He will not be coming back to bother you again. He knows you are with me, and will not risk walking into another trap to deposit magic in you. He will use his other depositories instead, which means we must find one of them and lay our trap for him there.”

“So, we find another of his depositories, and then you...?”

“Not me,” Shirai corrected. “It will be up to you, Mar, to get the Snowheart.”

Mar lost his train of thought. “I...*what?*”

SHIRAI refused to explain himself further until they were in Mar’s car, Mar following the directions supplied by Shirai as the snow spirit focused on homing in on the nearest depository. Between directions, Shirai explained his plan.

“I can’t sense that luck spirit until he’s quite close, but the same holds for him; he cannot sense me unless he is very close as well. You, as a human, he cannot sense at all—or at least he won’t be able to once I take the deposit out of you again. Left here.”

Mar turned. “Okay, so he can’t sense me...”

“Yes. That means that if you stay with the depository and wait for him to arrive, you will know he is there before he knows that you are. Those ridiculous bells he was wearing should alert you. I will stay nearby, but far enough away that he cannot sense me. Left again.”

“Wait. If you’re far enough away that he can’t sense you, how will you know where *he* is?”

“I won’t know where *he* is. I will sense the Snowheart. My power is still a part of it; I can sense it from quite some

distance. Once I feel it, I will hide, and you will wait. Once you see him, it is up to you to steal the Snowheart.”

“To do *what?*”

“Once—right here—once I take the deposit out of you, you will no longer feel like a depository. He won’t know you for the same human he almost killed yesterday unless he pays exquisitely close attention, and even then it’s unlikely. Thus, you should be able to surprise him and steal the Snowheart. Keep going straight.”

“What good will taking the Snowheart do? For that matter, how do you know he’s gonna have it? I mean, why would he carry it around with him?”

“He *needs* to carry it around with him,” Shirai explained. “He needs it with him if he intends to deposit its leftovers somewhere. It was with him last night, in a pouch at his waist. Didn’t you see it?”

“Um...”

“I suppose if you couldn’t sense it, you probably wouldn’t notice it,” Shirai said apologetically. “But at any rate, he *will* have it. And if you can take it, then he will no longer be able to use its power to augment his own. In a fair fight, without the Snowheart, I am far stronger than he. Once I feel the aura of the Snowheart pass over to you, I will strike.”

Mar slowed to a stop in front of a red light. “You can feel who’s holding it?”

Ice-cold lips pressed lightly against Mar's skin, just beneath his ear. Mar froze, delicious shivers dancing down his spine, and it took him a moment to realize the light had changed back to green.

"No," Shirai admitted in a whisper, his breath so cold against Mar's neck. "But I will know when you hold it, Mar. Believe me."

Before Mar could think of a reply to this, Shirai brought himself back up in his seat and looked ahead again. "Right, and then left, and another right. These 'streets' are so convoluted..."

The directions struck a chord in Mar's mind. "Wait.... Right, left, right?"

"Yes, I believe so. Why?"

"That's the way to my girlfriend's house." Mar listened to his own words, and snorted. "My girlfriend. Yeah, I say that now. We got together about a week ago, went out exactly three times, and broke up. She didn't really like me, and I..." He had to smile, now that he knew how stupid he had been. "I should have realized I couldn't make it with a girl, and just left her alone. But I think I was in denial, from about eighth grade until I saw you."

Shirai looked very confused. "Girlfriend? Is not 'girlfriend' a very close relationship?" His face clouded. "Are you...and this girl...?"

“Oh, God, no!” Mar said hastily. For some reason it hadn’t occurred to him that Shirai could still have the kind of mood swings he had been suffering from last night.

“‘Girlfriend’ is just like a close friend you’re *thinking* about having a close relationship with. At least, it’s supposed to be. And we did *not* want a close relationship with each other.”

“Then why was she your girlfriend?”

Mar frowned. “I...”

Now that he thought about it, that was a better question than it seemed. Why *had* he and Andie gotten together? What did they have in common? Precious little, other than the fact that they both liked to read. What had he seen in her? Nothing, actually. She was smart and nice, but so were a lot of other girls he knew. There had been no reason for him to ask her out. What had *she* seen in *him*? Nothing, or so she had said most vehemently when she broke up with him.

“I actually don’t know,” Mar said slowly. “Just about a week ago, I just kind of...felt like I should get closer to her. Something inexplicable. And I think she felt the same way, because she was really eager to go out with me. But once we did, I think we realized there was no point. There wasn’t actually anything about us that we really—”

“Oh yes there was,” Shirai interrupted, his confusion suddenly turned to steel. “Go to her house.”

“What? Why?”

“This girl is the depository I am sensing.”

Obviously Mar hadn’t become quite as jaded to surprises as he had thought. “*What?!?*”

“Like attracts like. The magic in you attracted you to her, and the reverse. That was the feeling between the two of you.”

“*Andie* is another depository?!”

“Precisely. It explains everything you have said so far: your inexplicable feelings, her unusual eagerness to be close to you, the fact that we are heading toward her house at this moment.” Shirai paused, then went faintly blue. “I...must confess.... I am relieved. I...find the idea of sharing you with another...difficult to accept.”

Mar wanted to protest some more, but found that after that, he really couldn’t.

ANDREA lived in an apartment rather closer to college than Mar’s, and rather more expensive because of the fact. Where Mar’s apartment was a tiny, four-room affair with one bedroom, one bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room (the last two only separated by the sink counter, not actual walls), Andie’s was almost twice the size, a comfortable cube of rooms with everything Mar’s apartment had and more.

She answered the door before the second knock; a pretty, petite girl with golden-brown hair and big blue eyes. When she saw who it was standing on the welcome mat, she let out her breath in an irritated sigh.

“Mar, what are you doing he—?”

Then she saw Shirai.

Shirai’s hair alone would have been enough to astound Andrea. Mar knew she wasn’t fond of men with hair past shoulder-length, and Shirai’s was down to his thighs, to say nothing of its impossible translucence. Combine that with his ivory-white skin, his pure white nails, and his bare feet, and Andie was without words; add his outlandish white robe, his inhuman reflecting eyes, and the breath twinkling out of his mouth as ice crystals, and she nearly had a heart attack.

“You are Andie,” Shirai said bluntly. “We have much to discuss and far less time than I had with Mar to discuss it in. You must accept right now that I am a snow spirit and that you are being victimized by a luck spirit before we go any farther.”

Andrea opened her mouth and closed it again, clearly unable to reply to this.

Mar squeezed around Andie into her apartment, and she stepped back, allowing Shirai to enter as well. She closed the door without looking at it, her eyes fixed on Shirai.

“Mar,” Andie said unsteadily, “who is *this*?”

“Just like he said,” Mar said. “His name is Shirai, and he is a snow spirit.”

Andie shook her head uneasily, although her eyes still never left Shirai. “Mar, what are you—”

“Andie,” Mar said gently, “*he is a snow spirit.*”

“I am,” Shirai said, very calmly. “And in a very short time, we are expecting a luck spirit to come here, in an attempt to leave within you a certain deposit of luck magic—”

“*Magic?!*” Andie’s voice rose. “Magic doesn’t exist!”

“Yes, it does, actually,” Mar said, rather enjoying this. “There was a bunch of it in you and a bunch of it in me because this luck spirit—”

“Mar, you have lost your mind! You and this man both!” Andie’s shoulders had risen like the hackles of a wolf, and her eyes were set in the look that meant that she hadn’t taken in a word that had been said to her and wasn’t going to until the sky fell in. “I don’t know what you’re doing here, but I’m calling the police!”

Oh, crap. Why can’t she just listen for once in her damn life?! “Andie, don’t do that until we explain every—”

Shirai’s hand landed on the phone first, and a solid shell of ice encased it completely, freezing it to the wall. Andie jumped, and yelped.

“I cannot let you do something as foolish as I believe that would have been until we have you understanding the entire

situation,” Shirai said, still as calm as though Andie was agreeing with his every word. “I believe you have been having bad luck lately?”

“What does that have to do with—?!”

“I think you can pretty safely take that as a yes, Shirai,” Mar contributed.

“Then we were correct in our thinking,” Shirai said.

“What thinking?! What are you talking about, magic in me and Mar—?!”

Shirai suddenly snapped his fingers. “That’s right. I almost forgot. Mar, I need to take back that luck deposit.”

And with no more warning than that, he put one arm around Mar’s waist and the other around his shoulders, and kissed him deeply on the mouth.

Andie screamed louder than Mar had ever heard her before, but he didn’t have time to concentrate on her. The familiar cold slid down his throat, and this time, perhaps because he wasn’t so stunned by the cold itself, Mar actually *felt* it wrap around something inside of him—something hidden deep inside of him—drawing it together and up and out.

Then the cold was gone, and the hateful little ball of luck-metal bounced off Mar’s teeth over Shirai’s. Shirai drew slightly back, then changed his mind, reached out again, and placed another soft kiss on Mar’s lips, sweet and cold as ice cream. Mar had to smile.

Andie wasn't smiling, Mar saw as Shirai let go. She was turned firmly away, her teeth gritting almost audibly. Shirai spat out the ball of luck-magic into his hand, strode up to Andie, and touched her shoulder. She whirled as though she intended to strike him, but froze as he held up the ball of metal for her examination.

"This was inside of Mar, and there is another inside of you," Shirai said gravely. "It was placed there by a luck spirit, and has been the source of countless unlucky events in Mar's life over the past few days, once it grew large enough to exert its influence upon him. That luck spirit will be coming here soon to drop more of his power into you, for he dares not use Mar any longer now that he knows I am with him, and he has no time to search out another depository when he used so much magic the last time I encountered him. Mar and I are going to—"

Shirai stiffened all at once. "He's coming. I feel it."

Andie clearly had a few things to say to all this—enough that she looked as though she were choking on them. Shirai paid her no mind, but instead turned to Mar. "Grab the Snowheart, and I will be here. If you need me before you can grab the Snowheart, get outside of this building. If you are in open air, I will feel you and I will come regardless of the Snowheart." He hesitated. "This does not seem appropriate, but Mar, I value your safety above the Snowheart. I will have another chance at the Snowheart; I will not have another you."

Impulsively, Mar ran to Shirai and kissed him quickly, almost violently.

“For luck,” he muttered, pulling away. “Both yours and mine.”

Shirai smiled, and passed one last kiss between them. “Then we need more than one.”

Then Shirai closed his eyes in concentration. A freezing wave of cold hit both Mar and Andie like a hammer and left ice on the carpet, and a huge white bird leapt up onto Andie’s open windowsill, and took flight out into the air.

MAR was still staring out the window, wondering where it was that Shirai was going, when Andie’s voice exploded in on his thoughts like dynamite.

“What is going on here?!”

Mar turned, almost dreamily, and looked at his ex-girlfriend. Andie’s face was beet-red, and she looked like she wanted to punch something into nonexistence. She also looked like she thought Mar would be a good candidate for the punching.

“You tell me what’s going on right this minute, Mar Roy, or I swear to you—”

“Shirai already told you what’s going on here, Andie,” Mar said, almost having to force himself to concentrate on the matter at hand. “We’re trying to catch a luck spirit. He’s

coming this way right now, to try to put more magic into you.” Mar paused, realizing something. “Oops. You’d better pretend to be asleep. I don’t think he tries it unless you’re asleep.”

“Asleep? Asleep?! You think I can pretend to be asleep?!” Andie was turning redder than was healthy. “You suddenly appear on my doorstep without so much as a text message, led around by some white-headed loon who’s *clearly* up to no good, spouting some story about snow and luck spirits and magic, and you expect me to—”

“If it’s just a story, then how did Shirai turn into a bird and go out that window?” Mar asked, waving at the window in question. In a less urgent time, he might have found it funny that both he and Andie had gone through the same kind of denial even when Shirai’s powers were demonstrated literally in front of their noses, but right now, he just found it aggravating. “How did he freeze the phone?”

“I don’t know what he’s doing or what he’s told you, but it’s obviously all a lie. A trick. He’s deceiving you, Mar! Taking advantage of you!”

Now that, Mar took umbrage at. “Shirai is not taking advantage of me, Andie.”

“Oh no?!” Andie retorted. “Look at what he’s done to you already!”

“Done to me? What has he done to me?” Mar folded his arms. “What, his kissing me?”

Andie winced. The idea offended her sensibilities. “He’s got you good as brainwashed, Mar! You obviously believe everything he says, and when he walks up and does stuff like that to you, you just stand there with this big stupid grin on your face, like—”

“I believe what he says because he’s *right!*” Mar yelled, finally incensed. “He *is* a snow spirit, and that metal ball *is* what’s causing our bad luck, and there *is* a luck spirit, whom I *am* going to help him take out! And believe it or not, Andie, I like it when he kisses me *all* on my own! I don’t need brainwashing to enjoy something like that!”

“Mar, I’m saying this because I’m your friend! Maybe we’re not particularly close, but I still care about you, and I don’t want to see you get involved with somebody who’s trying to deceive you!”

“If we’re friends, Andie, then *listen* to me!” Mar roared. “SHIRAI HAS NOT DECEIVED ME! AT ALL! OKAY?! I’ve seen it! Hell, I’ve *felt* it! I’ve seen things.... There is no other explanation for it all, Andie! He’s a snow spirit!”

“He’s *not* a snow spirit, Mar!” Andie shouted back, clenching her fists even tighter in furious exasperation. “Don’t you get it?! He’s some kind of pervert, deluding you with that story! He’s probably dancing around with glee inside that he can do things like that to you and get away with it! He’s—”

“For the last time, he is *not* taking advantage of me, Andie!” Mar wanted to hit her. “Kissing is nothing. I *slept* with him last night! And it was *my* idea!”

“You’re both *guys*, Mar!”

“*I don’t care!*” Mar’s hands balled into fists. “*I wouldn’t care if he was a cat, Andie. I love him!*”

He hadn’t fully known it until he said it. But hearing it, he realized it was true.

“He’s cool and smart and distant and weird and strong and vulnerable and gorgeous and helpless and he needs me,” Mar said, feeling the truth of every word as he said it. “He’s a total mystery and at the same time I think I know him better than he knows himself now. He’s lived without a heart or emotions for centuries and now he’s got them back and he doesn’t understand or control any of them and he lets them out to me. *Me*. I’m a cookie-cutter college student with no recognizable future—” Mar stopped, realizing something. “But he changes that. He changes all of that, because he can *be* my future. I love him, Andie! I love him! And that’s more than I’ll ever be able to say about you!”

Something about his voice had stopped Andie’s tirade. She was looking at him as though she were seeing him in a light she had never seen before.

“I love him,” Mar repeated softly. “I could never have any feelings for you; for any woman. I love *him*.”

“Beautiful,” sighed a voice.

Mar whirled. Andie screamed.

The luck spirit was standing on the ceiling.

“I’M not sure whether to congratulate you, thank you, or feel very sorry for you,” the luck spirit said, standing perfectly nonchalantly there on the ceiling.

Andie seemed glued by shock. Shirai, she had been able to deal with. This luck spirit, though, was not even temporarily mistakable as human, and not just because he was standing upside-down on the ceiling. With skin greener than any makeup could have achieved, eyes a glowing amber shade that no contacts could have produced, and hair that no dye could possibly have made look like the rainbow spray off a waterfall, the luck spirit *looked* like what he was. And Andie *could* not deal with that.

Mar, however, had no choice about dealing with this spirit even if he had wanted one.

“What for?” he demanded.

“Well, congratulate you, of course,” the luck spirit said, walking casually toward Mar across the ceiling in a way disconcertingly similar to an overlarge emerald spider, “for managing to get that snow spirit into your bed. Some spirits, they’re easy. Water spirits particularly. They’ll protest, but they’ll never do anything more than that. Where do you think mermaid legends came from? Luck spirits, like me? For somebody as good-looking as you, we’ll lie with you in a

heartbeat. Turn on you in the next, but I'm sure you figured that out already."

"I had guessed that, yeah," Mar said coolly.

"Snow spirits, though," the luck spirit chuckled quietly, "are impossible. No emotions, no lust, no desire to lie with anyone, even each other. So, you managing to bed one? Impressive. Extremely impressive. Even if you had my help with it."

Mar wished he had something huge, blunt, and heavy right at this moment. "You almost killed him."

"But I have to thank you, as well," the luck spirit continued, as though Mar hadn't spoken. "Because if you *hadn't* been with him, you wouldn't reek of his magic. And if you didn't reek of snow-magic, I would never have recognized you as the human I dropped off the side of the building the other night."

Mar stiffened. *Crap!*

"So...the congratulations, and the thanks," the luck spirit said, still moving toward Mar, one leisurely step at a time. "But at the same time, my deepest apologies."

"What the hell for?" Mar snarled.

The luck spirit flipped in midair, landing right in front of Mar with a jingle of bells and no other sound. No human could land so lightly. From behind Mar, Andie let out a squeak.

“Apologies,” the luck spirit breathed, “that your bedtime was wasted with such a cold...”

One slim green finger traced Mar’s collarbone.

“harsh...”

His finger traced down the front of Mar’s shirt.

“inexperienced...”

His thumb rubbed lightly across Mar’s belt buckle.

“lover.”

Mar couldn’t believe it. The luck spirit was trying to seduce him.

Actually, he supposed it made sense. The luck spirit knew that Mar was Shirai’s ally, and if he knew anything about human males at all, he must know that the easiest way to have your way with one is to make them want their way with you. If Mar could be inveigled into switching sides, that would give the luck spirit the advantage of both the Snowheart and a human assistant Shirai wouldn’t be expecting an attack from, while Shirai would have only the disadvantage of the uncontrolled emotions of his heart.

But that wasn’t the real reason Mar couldn’t believe the luck spirit was trying to seduce him. The main reason was the fact that this close, the pouch—the pouch Shirai had mentioned, the one he claimed held the Snowheart, the one Mar was trying to steal—was in plain view at the luck spirit’s waist.

Surely not. It was too easy. If Mar played along with the seduction for just a minute—less than a minute, even—that pouch could be in his hand. But that was too easy! This luck spirit couldn't possibly be dumb enough to fall for something like that!

But what if he was?

The luck spirit was only centimeters away from Mar now, and Mar made a split-second decision. It didn't matter if the luck spirit was trying to trick him or not. If the spirit really was dumb enough to do this, then this was Mar's chance. If he wasn't, possibly by making him think that Mar was could *make* a chance. With the spirit already this close, there was really no other option.

Mar spared a brief, almost apologetic thought toward Andie—he was still ticked about her aversion to the truth about him and Shirai, but she didn't really deserve to have two men start making out in her living room—before the luck spirit pressed their lips together.

The luck spirit *was* experienced. Mar had to admit that as soon as their lips touched. Every movement he made was sweet, sensuous, and leisurely, drawing out every feeling into a symphony of sensations that rippled inside of Mar's skin. Experienced, yes. But experience could only count for so much.

There was no passion in the luck spirit's kiss. It *was* a symphony, and the luck spirit was conducting, leading Mar along on the notes he himself chose and played. Shirai did

not play, or stay distant in the moment of intimacy; Shirai was *there*, fierce and cold and uncontrolled, his breath sharp with the scent of the morning dew that freezes in the cold, the rose growing in the middle of a snowdrift, the snowflakes that spin in the pure cold air of the north. The luck spirit smelled of clover and honey and sunlight, and it made Mar want to gag.

What truly separated the luck spirit from Shirai, however—something that Mar would never have guessed he would miss—was body temperature. The luck spirit was warm, pliant, supple, as slender and caressing as a breeze; his fingers slipped underneath Mar's shirt and brushed across his stomach like tickling blades of grass. It was nothing like having Shirai touch him. Shirai's fingers traced cold across Mar's entire body, forcing his circulation to rise until his blood felt steaming inside his chilled skin, heat on top of passion until even the lightest touch made his entire skin vibrate.

That, no amount of experience could reproduce.

Mar kept his mind on the polar coldness of Shirai's fingers and flung himself into the seduction with abandon, crushing the luck spirit closer to him, wishing he could snap him like the twig he seemed to be. The luck spirit pulled Mar's shirt off over his head, green hands leaves in a breeze that swirled around Mar until he wanted to scream with irritation. He rubbed his hands up underneath the luck spirit's shirt of bells and listened to them ring, trying to ignore the infernal tickling across his back and ribs.

Behind them, Andie was silent, revolted (and yet irresistibly attracted) into speechlessness by a spectacle from which she couldn't tear her eyes. The luck spirit was speaking, murmuring softness against Mar's mouth, his throat, but Mar wasn't listening. The pouch was close. Very close.

Mar brought his hands down out of the luck spirit's shirt and slid them down the spirit's bell-clad hips, interested despite himself to find that there was nothing underneath the bells. The luck spirit's whispers were white noise in his ears. He was so close. He brought his hands back up along the inside of the spirit's thighs, hearing a quiet moan merge with the jingling of a score of sliding bells—and—

Mar linked his hands together and slammed them up between the luck spirit's legs, then grabbed for the pouch.

A slender green hand seized his thieving hand in a grip like a vise and crushed down hard, making the bones in Mar's wrist creak alarmingly. Mar yelped, and looked up from his captured hand to meet the luck spirit's amber gaze. He hadn't so much as flinched.

"Sometimes," the luck spirit said casually, "it is useful to be able to change one's form."

Mar jerked himself back, trying to break away, but the luck spirit's fingers only tightened, exerting far more strength than those frail-looking fingers should have been able to exert, and Mar had to gasp with the pain.

“I was beginning to hope I was making an impact on you,” the luck spirit sighed, as though to himself. “But it seems I can’t trust you after all.”

“Like I could ever trust *you!*” Mar spat, cursing himself. It *had* been a trap. And he had walked right into it.

“Well, you could have trusted me not to kill you,” the luck spirit said. “Up until you proved I couldn’t expect the same from you.” He twisted Mar’s wrist around behind his back, bringing Mar down to his knees, and forced his head up with one bell-clad knee of his own. “Now, of course, I *am* going to have to kill you.”

Mar went cold.

The luck spirit raised one rainbow eyebrow. “Oh, don’t look so worried yet. There are formalities to observe, you know.”

“Formalities? For *killing* me?”

The luck spirit sighed. “All right; there aren’t really any formalities. But what fun is it to rape you unless I can claim it was only duty on my part after the fact?”

Mar lost coherent speech. “I—you—*rape*—?”

“What better way to make sure that that damned snow spirit’s last moments in this world are a living hell than raping the man he’s obviously in love with?” the luck spirit asked rhetorically.

With no warning whatsoever, the luck spirit abruptly twisted Mar's wrist to the side. There was a moment of pain—then a sharp *crack*—then a burning, immolating burst of pain that devoured Mar's arm whole and refused to let it go. Mar had to bite back a scream.

The luck spirit let go of Mar's broken wrist and kicked him down onto his back, pressing his bare foot down on Mar's stomach. He leaned forward along the line of his golden trousers, and smiled into Mar's face—but Mar, nearly blinded by the pain of falling onto his wrist, didn't see it.

"It's easier to hold you down if you don't have both arms," the luck spirit commented, and he reached down and unzipped Mar's jeans.

When a lamp smashed into the side of his face.

Mar didn't realize the lamp had hit the spirit until the foot disappeared from his sternum, allowing him to curl up into a fetal position around his broken wrist—which he did, immediately. Only sheer force of will allowed him to lift his head up and see what was going on.

Andie was advancing on the luck spirit, pelting him with every object she could reach—a book, a chair, an encyclopedia, a snow globe, a china plate, a shoe—and screaming at the top of her lungs.

"YOU BARGE INTO *MY* HOME, BREAK MY FRIEND'S WRIST, TRY TO *RAPE* HIM, AND EXPECT ME TO JUST STAND BY AND LET IT HAPPEN?! GUESS WHAT, PSYCHO PERV, YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER THING COMING! I DON'T

CARE WHAT'S GOING ON OR WHAT YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING; THIS IS MY APARTMENT AND I WON'T ALLOW IT! NOW GET OUT NOW!"

Unfortunately for Andie, her first projectile had only done its job because the luck spirit had not been prepared for it. As Andie finished throwing her shoe and grabbed for a pillow, the luck spirit moved at the speed of light to a position right in front of her face. Shocked into releasing a little shriek, Andie swung her pillow like a sword, but the luck spirit was far too quick. He ducked underneath her swing and came up with his hand streaking for her throat. Before Andie knew what was happening, the spirit's palm connected hard with her esophagus and knocked her flying to the floor, where she struggled helplessly for air.

"And here I thought that because you remained quiet while I tried my best to seduce him, you would stay that way," the luck spirit said coolly, watching Andie writhe like a beached fish. "Clearly, I must eliminate you before I can finish tormenting—"

Mar bulled into the luck spirit at the knees, knocking him to the ground. The luck spirit's head cracked heavily against the table, and for a moment—an inhumanly short moment—he was stunned. Only a moment. But that moment was enough.

Mar seized the pouch and ripped it off the luck spirit's belled trousers.

Something white exploded in through the window, something pearly and incandescent that brought the North Pole with it. And out of the whiteness, Shirai fell like a meteor, holding an icicle like a massive sword. A great wind lifted everything in the room, including Andie, and threw it about like peas in a rattle. Freezing, radiating cold burned the side of Mar's face and all down his bare chest, every bell of the luck spirit's trousers freezing to his skin—and then the bells were gone, and the cold was gone, and there was only a huge icicle stabbed into the floor to show where the luck spirit had once been. And Shirai was crouched on the floor a safe distance from his icicle sword, holding Mar in his arms.

“Shirai,” Mar whispered, his voice unsteady and quivering, “Shirai...he was going to....”

“He's dead,” Shirai murmured, his body filling Mar's with familiar, almost comforting cold. “You retrieved the Snowheart, and I could kill him.”

Mar looked vaguely down at his uninjured hand, in which he was still clutching the pouch, and felt—even above everything else—relief. The utmost relief. He had succeeded. He was safe.

“He's dead,” Shirai repeated, stroking Mar's back with one hand.

A howl built up inside of Mar's chest, ricocheting and building with the release that utter relief brings; and before he could stop it, it had torn itself out of his mouth, and he

was sobbing into Shirai's shoulder, releasing the pain of his broken wrist and the terror of his near-failure and the horror of his near-rape only now, now that he knew he was safe.

Shirai held him. Just held him, letting him cry, until the tears he needed to shed were gone, wincing every so often but still holding him tightly and eternally. Mar finally wiped his eyes so that he could see again, and almost burst into tears all over again when he saw that the hot, salty water had melted trails down Shirai's arm as sure as the tip of a hot poker. Except pulling away from him, trying to apologize, he also realized that those of his tears that had fallen on his own body had frozen solid, decorating him with little diamond droplets, and for some reason he had to laugh. And Shirai laughed as well, mirth warming Mar until the teardrops melted, mirth cooling Shirai until the tear-burned channels froze over.

When Mar finally stopped laughing, guilt smote him at once as he thought of Andie.

Andie had flown to the opposite side of the room with the force of the wind Shirai had brought in his entrance, and when she landed, lack of air had made her pass out. Now, however, she looked much better than she had when Mar had last seen her, struggling and blue from the luck spirit's blow. She had begun to breathe again, and her face was back to its normal color. She looked like she was sleeping.

"I should—" Mar said, rising to his feet, realizing only afterward that he had no idea what it was he "should" do.

Cool arms enfolded him again from behind, and a hand took his around his broken wrist. Ice froze around Mar's skin, forming a thick makeshift cast like a bracelet of milky crystal.

"You should dress yourself," Shirai murmured into Mar's hair. "I will take the luck deposit from her and remove the icicle—and then we should leave her. She is quite the little fighter, but she is not as accepting as you. She would rather forget that this has happened than have us here to remind her of it when she awakens."

Mar flushed brightly and yanked up his jeans while Shirai went and touched the shimmering icicle in the floor, which drained away from itself back into Shirai, from whom it had come. Mar's shirt was MIA, thrown God only knew where by the wind Shirai had brought, but eventually he found it on top of the bookshelf, just as Shirai went over to Andie and lowered his mouth to hers.

Jealousy leapt like a flame in Mar's chest. He turned his back on Shirai and Andie, busying himself with getting his shirt off the bookshelf, then taking more time to pull it over his head than was strictly necessary. Before he was finished, a snowflake of a kiss dropped on the small of his back.

Mar jumped, whirling with a yelp to find Shirai staring at him with a *very* un-Shirai-ish look on his face.

"Now," he said softly, teasingly. "We have achieved our goal. We have retrieved the Snowheart. We have won the war. I believe it is time for a celebration."

Mar raised one eyebrow. “I thought snow spirits didn’t eat.”

“Not that kind of celebration,” Shirai clarified, leading Mar out the door. “The kind of celebration that most stringently requires returning to your apartment. More specifically, to your bed.”

“Oh, *that* kind of celebration.”

THEY celebrated, all right. They celebrated until Mar felt numb all the way to his bone marrow: wrapped in loving cold, completely satiated, utterly exhausted, and ridiculously happy.

Shirai was lying next to him, iridescent in the darkness, head pillowed on his white arms. “You should have your wrist looked at tomorrow.”

“Ooh, my wrist. Thanks for reminding me.” Mar pulled his arm out from the blankets and flopped it onto the mattress between them. “Better keep it cool, right?”

“Yes,” Shirai said.

There was a pause, and Mar yawned.

“Mar,” Shirai said suddenly.

“...’ees?” Mar said indistinctly through his yawn.

“I have to leave.”

Slumber vanished in an instant. Mar sat bolt upright. “What?”

“I have to return to the north, to give back the Snowheart. And, more importantly, to tell the other snow spirits the truth. That we can take our hearts back; that it is grief that kills us, not emotion itself. I have to stop something like this from ever happening again.”

“You—well, yeah, I mean, I know you—but you—” Mar didn’t want to plead, but it slipped out without his conscious consent. “You’ll come back, won’t you? Please? Someday?”

“Yes,” Shirai said positively. “Of course. Once I have finished with the business of the Snowheart, and ensured that my clan is safe, I will come back. I couldn’t not.”

Mar was silent for a moment. “When will you leave?”

Shirai took a deep breath. “I...must go now. I cannot leave my clan without news, knowing that I have their hearts. And on the way back, I must find the other depositories and relieve them of their burdens, then find a safe place to dispel the magic myself. It is best if I go now.”

Mar nodded. “I thought it probably would be. There’s just one thing. Before you go...”

Shirai waited, his eyes black as the room around them.

“Before you go,” Mar continued, not sure whether this was something he should ask or not, “can I see it? The Snowheart?”

Hazel eyes stared into black. With every facet of Shirai's reflective eyes mirroring the darkness around them, Mar couldn't tell what the snow spirit was thinking—or even if he was insulted by the request.

Shirai reached out and brushed Mar's cheek with one hand, light as a breeze.

“Of course.”

Rising, lithe and bare as the air around him, Shirai glided across Mar's floor to a table by the window, where he had thrown the pouch when they had entered the room hours ago. Mar stood up as well, shedding his blankets, and joined him, looking down at the pouch, illuminated by a bar of moonlight.

Shirai picked up the pouch and handed it to Mar wordlessly. Mar undid the drawstring of the pouch, reached in...and pulled out the most fantastic crystal he had ever dreamed of seeing.

Mar stared at it, captivated. It was large enough to fill the space of his cupped hands, perfectly spherical, clear as water, and covered with a hundred—no, a thousand—no, more, glittering, sparkling, shimmering facets. The moonlight touched every facet from a different angle and filled the entire crystal with glimmering flecks of light; the shadows touched every facet from another angle and shot through the light like clouds in a sunset. A million tiny rainbows breathed from the dance of light and dark, shooting out into

the darkness, fluttering across the walls and the ceiling like a million colored snowflakes.

“Oh, Shirai,” Mar whispered. “It’s...it’s...” Words failed him. “And you’re going to destroy it?”

“It is beautiful,” Shirai said, watching the rainbows dance off the crystal with a distant look in his eyes, now glittering with the radiance of the Snowheart. “Very beautiful. But it is a prison. And no prison, no matter how beautiful, has the right to exist.”

Mar hesitated, then tipped the Snowheart back into its pouch.

“I will see you soon,” Shirai whispered, embracing Mar fiercely, almost hungrily, pressing white skin against peach in the softness of the moonlight. “I promise.”

The snow spirit took the pouch back from Mar, pulled out the drawstring, and hung it around his neck like a pendant. Then there was a blast of cold, and a bird like a huge, pure white falcon was standing there in Mar’s room.

The bird hopped up onto Mar’s table, pouch held securely around its neck. Mar went to the window and yanked it open, and the bird took off, flying out the window and soaring away, into the darkness of the sky.

Mar watched it wing away until it resembled only a faraway white star in the sky. Then, until it was lost to sight.

It was the day before the day that would mark the one-year anniversary of Shirai's departure. Late night. Bright moonlight. Silence. Oppressive, depressive silence.

Mar sat on the couch in the living room, sprawled across it in the boneless manner of tired young men, and stared at the moonlight falling across his floor. It was coming in through the window that had, at this time last year, been destroyed by burglars attracted through the power of a luck deposit. Yet another reminder that Shirai was gone and that life had moved on.

It hadn't been conscious. For weeks—okay, months—Mar had been waiting for Shirai to come back. He was on tenterhooks every moment of every day, waiting to see a form as white and shining as snow in the sunlight. He had slept lightly every night, waiting for a tap on the window, or a burst of frozen air that would herald Shirai's arrival. He had waited.

And waited.

Shirai had not returned.

At first Mar had made excuses. The process of safely dismembering the Snowheart was just taking a while, that was all. Then he had become irritated: Where the hell is he? Then came denial: He couldn't have forgotten me. He couldn't have forgotten me.

God damn it, he forgot me!

When that realization had finally hit, Mar had...well, gone and tried to date somebody else. A human. At least, he was pretty sure Joshua had been human. It was stupid and juvenile—Mar knew it—but worse, it was a failure. Joshua had been very nice and very good-looking, but he was not cold. He was not the winter snow given form. He was not Shirai.

It hadn't worked out. And Mar had gotten mad again. His relationship with Shirai had ruined him for a relationship with someone of his own race! And Shirai couldn't be bothered to come back, even just to break up with him?!

Now, though, Mar wasn't sure what he felt or thought. The idea that Shirai had forgotten him was, if he could be so bold as to say it, impossible. He was irreversibly tied to the return of Shirai's emotions and the understanding of the Snowheart, wasn't he? He was sure he was. As long as Shirai had emotions and the memory of the Snowheart remained, he would remember Mar.

So why was he not back?

There was only one explanation. He had found someone else.

Another snow spirit.

Mar had to admit, he could understand that. *He* couldn't even stand humans anymore, and he *was* one! Shirai was a snow spirit. He lived with God only knew how many others like him. Able to change shape. Able to become as beautiful as they desired. Able to freeze skin with one touch...

Mar shivered at that memory still. Was it any wonder that Shirai hadn't come back?

No. Not at all.

"Are you cold?"

Mar almost fell off the couch with a strangled yelp and—Shirai.

Shirai was there.

He looked exactly the same as he had a year ago: rippling icy hair, frozen milk for skin, colorless eyes reflecting the room's light and shadows and yet sparkling with a little light of their own. His body was as strong and pale as ever, hard and shapely beneath the folds of white robe, his nails still white like the frost that rimes windows in the early hours of the morning.

Mar stared.

"I'm glad I caught you awake," Shirai said, his voice deep and soft, like a snowdrift from a childhood memory. "It has been so long since I last saw you."

Mar felt huge and clumsy and very, very stupid. Almost everything he had felt over the last year came back to haunt him in a single second. Shirai was here. He had not forgotten. He had not abandoned. And Mar had not trusted him. Had, in fact, gone behind his back with someone else. What do you say when a snow spirit returns for you after a year of waiting and you've cheated on him?

Shirai strode up to the couch and threw himself on top of Mar, arms locking around his neck, hair falling across them both like a blanket. Mar yelped again, with surprise and shock and a cold he had forgotten the wonderful intense feeling of.

It was as if Shirai had only left yesterday.

“I’ve wanted to see you,” Shirai whispered into Mar’s collarbone. “I’ve wanted to see you so badly.”

Mar hesitated only for an instant. Then all his insecurities were washed away in the loving *need* he felt from Shirai, the need for him to be here, to be Mar. He wrapped his own arms around Shirai in response, and felt tears come to his eyes.

“I thought you forgot to come back,” Mar whispered into Shirai’s hair. “I thought...I thought there was another snow spirit.”

“No, and there’s not likely to be,” Shirai said. He looked up into Mar’s face, and to Mar’s astonishment the mirror-like eyes looked almost sheepish. “I...must confess, I was there for so long, I began to long for...companionship. But when I...tried...because yes, I tried...I could not enjoy it. They are so cold. All of them. I don’t want cold.” The sheepishness died away, transforming into an odd light. “I want warmth. *Your* warmth, Mar.”

Mar let out a half-laugh, half-sob. “Shirai, I tried too. I couldn’t help myself. I thought you weren’t coming back, and

I tried, and I can't enjoy it either, from humans. I want cold. This cold. *Your* cold."

Shirai seemed taken aback for a moment. Then he smiled. No, not smiled. *Beamed*.

"I'm so glad. Because, you see, Mar, I have a proposition for you."

Mar frowned. "Sorry?"

"The reason I was so long in the north was this," Shirai explained. "The other snow spirits do not believe me. I cannot persuade them that it is safer to keep our hearts than to keep them hidden. Nothing I do will convince them that I am not about to melt at any second—and the idea that I am in love horrifies them even more. They say I am lying, and that if it were true I would be dead and gone."

"Yes?" Mar prompted.

"So although I tried everything I could think of, nothing worked," Shirai said, beaming still wider. "So I realized that I by myself could not persuade them. I need help."

"And?" Mar was suddenly finding it difficult to breathe.

"And so, I want you to come to the north with me," Shirai said. "I want you to come with me, and stay with me, for as long as you can. I want this in part in hopes that seeing the truth of us, the rest of my clan will see reason and take back their hearts. But more, I want this because I want you much closer than we have been this last year. If I am not to

succeed, I would at least that you were with me while I failed.”

Joy flooded Mar like the most effervescent of wines. More than joy; excitement. “Come with you?!”

“Yes,” Shirai agreed.

“Come see the spirits and where you live and everything?!”

“Yes,” Shirai confirmed.

“Come live *with* you?!”

“Well, not with anyone else, I would hope,” Shirai said with alarm.

“Oh, God, Shirai! I—I—*yes*, of course, yes!” Mar burst out laughing, feeling like a bottle of Sprite shaken up until its insides foamed with bubbles and sweetness and energy. “Oh my God—I feel like I’m getting married or something. When can we leave?!”

“Tomorrow,” Shirai said decisively.

“Tomorrow?”

Shirai nodded, and pressed his mouth against Mar’s in a deep, passionate kiss. Mar kissed back with all the love and emotion he had, and the kiss felt to both of them like the fulfillment of a dream.

“Yes,” Shirai muttered, voice sultry against Mar’s lips. “Definitely not until tomorrow.”

IAN SENTELIK grew up in Valencia, California, just minutes away from Magic Mountain, and spent his adolescence singing karaoke and being traumatized by his best friend's mother. He currently attends school at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he is endeavoring to get his bachelor's degree in Creative Writing.



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